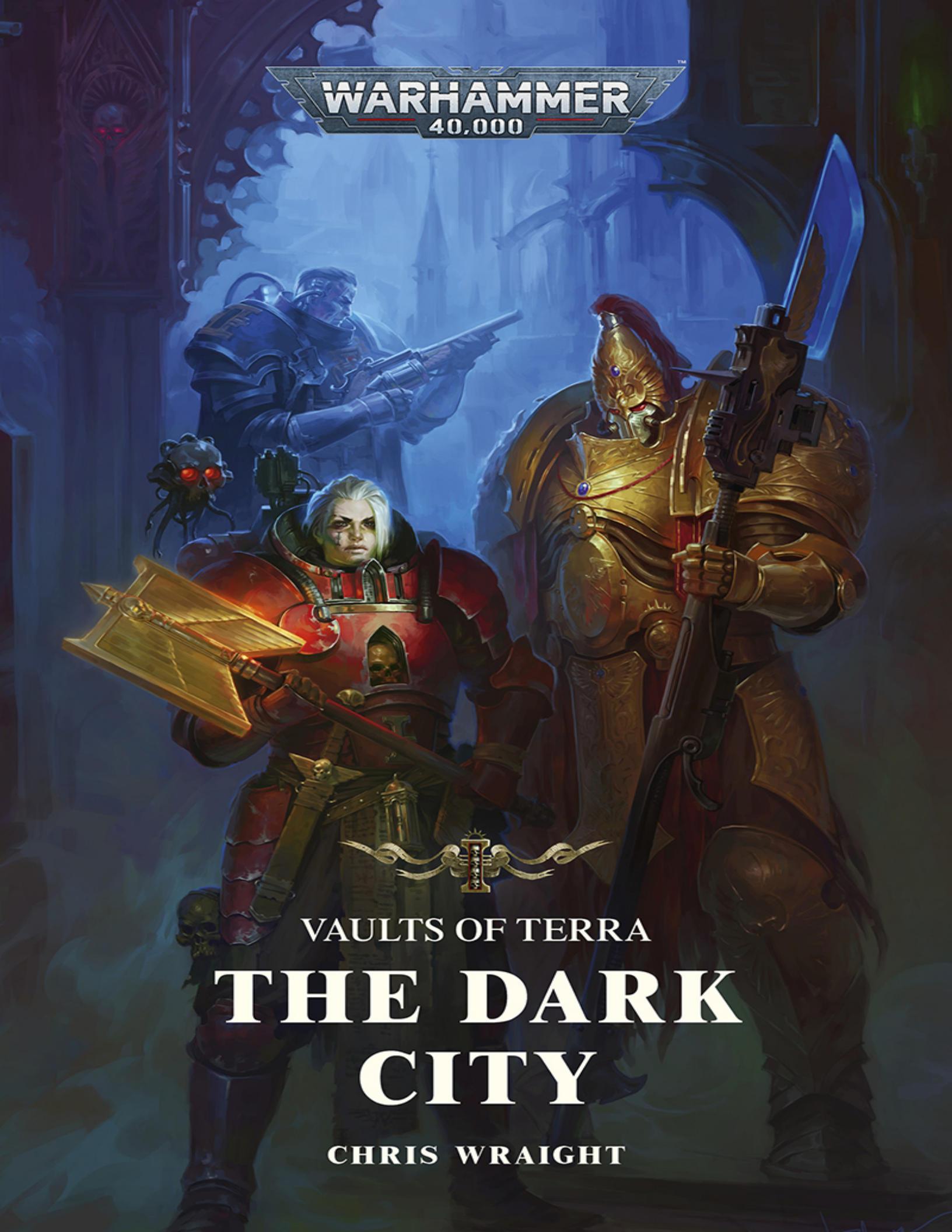

VAULTS OF TERRA

THE DARK CITY

CHRIS WRAIGHT

WARHAMMER
40,000
VAULTS OF TERRA
THE DARK CITY
CHRIS WRAIGHT

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For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind. By the might of His inexhaustible armies a million worlds stand against the dark.

Yet, He is a rotting carcass, the Carrion Lord of the Imperium held in life by marvels from the Dark Age of Technology and the thousand souls sacrificed each day so that His may continue to burn.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. It is to suffer an eternity of carnage and slaughter. It is to have cries of anguish and sorrow drowned by the thirsting laughter of dark gods.

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There is no peace amongst the stars, for in the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war.

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VAULTS OF TERRA

THE DARK CITY

I

CHRIS WRAIGHT

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CHAPTER ONE

He walked up to her chambers with confidence. You had to project confidence – to wear it like a glove. Let the thin skin of assurance fade, even by a fraction, and then you were vulnerable.

Latan Zijes had many enemies. That was not unusual. Any person of any consequence on Terra had enemies – the place was a nest of competing egos. Even now, when it felt like civilisation was poised on the very edge of annihilation, the schemes continued, the feuds ran on. Rampant disorder was a cloak behind which many scores could be quietly settled. And if things returned to normal at some stage, well then, who would remember just how things had been done in these most unusual of times?

The ordo had taught him to make a virtue of any weakness, make a weapon out of any setback. It was all a game in the end – a grand, multilayered game, and one he planned, in time, to dominate.

For now, though, he had to be careful. He had risen fast, and that bred resentment. Other players were skilful, patient, and had claws of their own. To be an inquisitor was to be forever surrounded by danger, from within and without the Imperium, and few individuals were as dangerous as the one he was about to meet. She was, in theory, his protector – a powerful

advocate on his behalf and a useful name to drop into difficult situations.

But that could change. Recent days had taught them all that. Everything – *everything* – could change.

Zijes adjusted the stiff collar of his jerkin. He pulled his real-leather overcoat tight over his chest, and patted the artificer Utanya laspistol at his belt. Not that he would be using that, of course – just habit.

He approached gilt-edged doors. Not as overwrought as most of the internal architecture of the labyrinthine Imperial Palace, but still too gaudy for his taste. The two guards had been primed to expect him, and didn't bother to challenge him or ask for credentials – no doubt he'd been scanned and double-scanned ever since arriving at the fortress, his every breath scrutinised on the long march up the stairwells. By the time they reached for the brass skullform door handles to let him inside, Zijes guessed that his vital signs and heat-image patterns were being busily pored over by a dozen or more menials down in the basements. Reassuring, in a way.

She was seated when he entered. She didn't get up, but remained poised elegantly on the edge of a velvet-upholstered chaise longue. A selection of armchairs was available for him. He went for a dark blue piece in the Interregnum style, low-slung with iron claw-feet. The walls of the chamber were marble, the floors polished granite. A pair of gold-chased suspensors hung, humming slightly, overhead. Tall windows gave a view out over an overcast, smoke-mottled urban landscape.

The Inquisitorial Representative, Kleopatra Arx, was a slight woman. Her physical appearance was almost an affectation – a suggestion of fragility that had fooled many opponents over the years. Even by the standards of the orders they both served, she was a ruthless operator, capable of acting with swift and deadly resolve whenever the circumstances demanded. The various branches of the Inquisition were not, and never had been, united. The many ordos shared no common bureaucracy or standing militia, and each inquisitor operated entirely independently. To be a representative to the High Lords of that sprawling collection of pathologically driven individuals, each one jealous of their cherished autonomy, was something close to mad hubris. And yet, Arx had served in the role now for a long time. Before the very recent disaster, she had been proposing reforms. They might even have gone through, had she been given more time to work on them.

So you had to respect Arx. You could think she was misguided, or vain, even deluded, but you had to take her seriously.

‘Inquisitor,’ she said, putting a china cup down onto a silver tray. As she did so, a tiny hummingbird flitted from her shoulder and hovered over the fireplace. Its feathers glittered, as did its beady eyes – undoubtedly artificial, the whole thing, but very cleverly made. ‘I am glad to see you alive.’

Zijes settled into the soft seat, crossed his legs and relaxed. He kept his gaze fixed on her while simultaneously entertaining himself trying to spot all the micro-weapons targeted on him. At least four so far, and he wasn’t even looking very hard.

‘Strange times we live in,’ he said. ‘I once thought I’d miss the best of the action by staying on Terra.’

Her gaze was steely. She never seemed to blink. All the time, that damned metal bird flitted back and forth.

‘You know things are broken, of course,’ Arx said, folding her hands over one another in her lap. ‘You may not understand just by how much. Where were you?’

‘When it happened? Kameriba zone nine. Took me a while to get back here, after your message got through.’

‘I don’t doubt it. So, I’ll not sweeten this for you.’ She spoke frostily, precisely. ‘The Cadian warfront is gone. You know that, yes? You can see for yourself the effect that has had. Half of Terra lost to insurrection, much of it long planned, some of it spontaneous. A psychic storm has hit. It will be the labour of a generation to repair the damage, assuming we survive the next few weeks.’

Zijes smiled bleakly. ‘A cheerful picture.’

‘It gets worse. The Astronomican is down. Our fleets are becalmed. So we are blind and we are crippled, just when the ancient walls that kept our greatest enemy away have been breached at last. If the scale of this present crisis were known outside these confines, then we would swiftly lose any hope of restoring order.’

Zijes’ expression never altered, but even for him, inured to shock by a career spent among heretics and monsters, her words bit deep. *The Astronomican is down.*

‘It can be restored,’ he said, more of a statement than a question – to

contemplate otherwise was impossible.

‘We must hope so. Every effort is being exerted. Restoration should be a matter for my esteemed counterpart, the Master of the Mountain, but he is dead. His staff are either dead too, or driven mad. Master Kerapliades has assumed control of what remains, supported by warriors of the Adeptus Astartes and tech-priests from the Mechanicus. The whole thing, though, to be perfectly candid, is a bloody mess.’

Zijes took that in. ‘Throne,’ he said. ‘I had–’

‘No idea. Of course not.’ Arx reached for her cup again. She took a sip, and the hummingbird darted across the room to a new vantage. ‘For myself, I have a thousand things to attend to, any one of which would in normal times occupy my entire focus. The Mountain should not be one of them, and those currently busy with its reconstruction would not thank me for interfering in their work. The prudent thing would be to leave them to it.’

Zijes smiled again. ‘Which you’re not going to do.’

Arx put the cup down with a soft clink. ‘You will be briefed on what we know. It’s not much, but it will demonstrate why I cannot let this be controlled by others. Every institution on this world has been rocked by the storm. Many souls have died, and many more will die in the days to come. Franck, the old Master, was hardly powerless. He was present, in his own domain, when the effect hit. He must have known a storm was coming, and yet proved unable to preserve himself. I wish to know why. I require someone trustworthy to make enquiries.’

‘Someone under your control.’

‘The opposite. A free agent. Though I could still be in the position to reward such an agent, were they to provide me with what I need.’

Zijes raised an eyebrow. ‘Going after a High Lord’s affairs,’ he said. ‘Hardly risk-free.’

‘But important. Because there’s another thing.’ Arx raised a slender finger, and a hololith of a woman’s face spun out of the air between them. ‘Another strange death. Inquisitor Adamara Rassilo – too sensible to have got herself killed for no good reason, and yet she too is gone. I had her dealings looked into. Difficult, at the moment, to find anything out of importance, but I do know she was responsible for the recent placement of several interrogators here on Terra. One name struck me in particular – a promising newcomer named Luce Spinoza. Heard of her?’

‘No.’

‘No reason why you should have. Except that I spoke to the Space Marine sergeant responsible for securing the Mountain after the worst of the trouble. An admirable example of the type – I recommended his promotion. He could tell me little about causes, but did confirm the presence of individuals there – inside the Fortress, right at the same time as the Master was killed. An inquisitor, Erasmus Crowl, and members of his entourage. What were they doing there? No one can tell me. They were allowed to slip away, apparently. Forgivable, given all else that was going on, but it leaves a loose end.’

Zijes nodded. ‘Spinoza was Crowl’s interrogator?’

‘Correct.’ She sat back, interlocking her hands again. ‘So we have two erased persons, both of them powerful, both of them capable, and one name linking the two. There is no sign of Crowl. His base of operations is known, and Spinoza may be there still, but it is set far into the uncontrolled zones now and hard to access at the best of times.’

Zijes thought on all that. ‘Hardly unusual for an inquisitor to be present when disaster occurs.’

‘They were there ahead of time,’ said Arx. ‘They raised the alarm. Something else – some separate trail – took them there. Something, I believe, connected to Rassilo’s disappearance.’ The hummingbird zipped back to her shoulder, landing lightly. ‘Or not. It should be looked into, just to be sure.’

‘But… now?’

‘Absolutely *now*.’ Arx leaned forward, placing her elbows on her knees, looking at him intently. ‘We are on the edge of destruction, inquisitor. I look out of these windows, and all I see is our future unravelling. While the Beacon remains dark, no armies are coming to save us. We do not even understand the nature of our catastrophe.’ Her face was bleak. ‘Knowledge. The tiniest scrap of it. Why was Crowl at the Mountain? Why did Rassilo die? Has something been missed, right at the top, for too long? I wish to know these things.’

‘Without being seen to be involved.’

‘We will survive this. We will go on to restore it all, just as it was, and the Imperium will remember the names who steered us back into supremacy. I will remember them. Just as I will remember those who failed to rise to the

occasion.’

Zijes laughed. ‘No need for that, Representative – you paint an intriguing enough picture. Show me what information you have, and I’ll look into it for you. If Spinoza is as new to this as you say, we’ll make a nice pair.’

‘I would not underestimate her.’

‘I won’t,’ said Zijes. He got up, seeing that the meeting was over. ‘I never do. That’s the game, is it not? Play it hard.’

‘It’s not a game,’ said Arx, still seated.

‘Of course not. Just a figure of speech.’

But it was, in truth. That was how he liked it. And now a new one was starting up, which was something to be very happy about indeed, because this was how reputations were made, and this was how narratives were controlled.

He had risen fast, had Latan Zijes. But there was space to rise yet further.

‘Is that the one?’ asked Luce Spinoza.

‘It is,’ replied Aneela.

The two of them had come to the spire in a black Nighthawk gunship bearing the livery of Courvain, one of only two that the citadel’s lexmechanics had managed to render usable again. Its engines stuttered as it held position two hundred metres up on stubby wings, kicking out spots of soot from the outtakes. Aneela and Spinoza manned the cockpit; the crew hold was filled with a squad of storm troopers primed for rapid deployment.

The cockpit viewers scanned across a scene of accelerated destruction. Directly ahead of them was the flank of a large horn-shaped hab-spire, blackened by the fires that had raged within it for days. Transitways and access viaducts needled out from its ruptured hide, connecting it with the neighbouring towers, all of which were in a similarly ravaged condition. Few lumens were lit, and the skies were the colour of engine oil, churning incessantly with heat-whipped storms.

Out in the open, on a narrow landing stage sited just in front of one of the spire’s many gaping intake maws, stood a single-person flyer. Its cockpit windows were smashed, its engine panels wrenched open. Three prone bodies lay under the shadow of its cracked wings, swiftly decaying in the hot air. Refuse was everywhere, skittering across the asphalt in skirling gusts, but no living subjects were visible on the scopes. The riots had lasted

a long time in these zones, but now their energies were ebbing at last, leaving behind a sullen world of fear and uncertainty. Hundreds of thousands of souls still cowered inside that single colossal spire complex, now terrified and alone, cut off from the benevolent instruments of Imperial order. If the still-active cults didn't get them, then the looters would, or their thirst, or hunger.

Help would not be coming, Spinoza knew, for a long time. This zone – Jaeda Novus – was too far from the core, a long way from where any kind of control was still being exerted. She'd heard the injunctions from Arx's people, and knew that assets were being pulled back to the Sanctum all across the globe. She'd even wondered whether, given what had happened, she had better respond to those now, and lend her support to the efforts being made within the Palace confines to get a grip on whatever strange disaster had befallen Terra. She had been tempted. If Crowl had truly left them for good now, running down his obsessions without heed for any wider considerations, then perhaps that was the only thing left to do. Forget Courvain, that half-ruined heap of ouslite. Forget the band of eccentrics and misfits who shambled around in its corridors, and get back into places where chains of command were properly defined and respect for institutions ran strong.

Not now, though. Spend long enough in a place, even one as decrepit as Courvain, and you started to put roots down, become entangled in promises, take on obligations. And some obligations, given what she'd done – given what she'd been *forced* to do – were impossible to shift now.

'Getting movement signals from just inside,' Aneela reported, holding the gunship steady. She was a fine pilot, Aneela. Spinoza was good herself, but Crowl had known how to pick his close staff, quietly assembling an entourage that, for all their surface unimpressiveness, knew what they were doing. 'Nothing, I would think, lord, you couldn't handle.'

Spinoza glanced at the augurs, took in the data, and nodded. 'Bring us in for the drop, then pull up and await my signal,' she said, reaching for her laspistol. 'Sergeant?'

'All is in readiness,' came Hegain's voice from the crew hold, accompanied by the click and snap of weapons being primed.

Aneela brought the Nighthawk down lower, and its downdraught sent the refuse piles tumbling. Spinoza hit the door release, and the heavy metal

cover hissed upwards. The air that rushed in stank of burning, and immediately her helm's rebreather kicked into full operation.

As the gunship neared the landing stage, she pushed herself clear and jumped out. Eight storm troopers crunched to the apron around her, all armed with hellguns and kitted out in enclosed combat armour. The Nighthawk immediately surged back up into the roiling skies, its marker lumens merging into the haze of smog and dust.

The storm troopers formed up around Spinoza, sweeping the open stage with their weapon muzzles. She broke into a jog, Hegain at her side. She didn't spend any time on the downed flyer. They would scan it later, just in case, but if Crowl had abandoned it then there wouldn't be anything useful to retrieve. The target was inside the spire, under the ink-dark shadow of the entrance maw, into a world of stench and muffled violence.

They moved swiftly down the long entrance ramp, and then up a stairwell and into the internal corridors. The stink grew worse – stale urine, vomit, spilled chems. A few straggling residents caught sight of them and scurried away like rats. The storm troopers' targeting beams angled down the dark tunnels, briefly catching on the edges of broken door frames and gaping windows. A hum of active machinery echoed up from the deep vaults below – clearly, at least some of the spire's huge power and filtration mechanisms were still operating. A few explosions cracked out, though all from a long way off.

They reached their destination. The entrance gates were smashed, the heavy blast doors in pieces. A gang of scrawny hivers had been squatting in the ruins, but didn't stay around for the storm troopers' arrival. Hegain let them go, and advanced up the portal.

'No signs detected inside,' he reported, running his gloved fingers over the scanner controls. 'Power down, security disabled.'

Spinoza led the way in. She hadn't brought Argent, the priceless crozius gifted her by Space Marines – no sense risking damage to that fine weapon unless it was likely to be useful. The standard-issue Accatran laspistol felt strangely light in her grip by contrast – a flimsy thing, barely better than her fists. Hegain stationed four of his troops at the broken gate; the rest came inside with her.

The interior of the hab still had a lingering air of strangeness. Its fittings had been ripped out, the powercells dragged from their jacks, the armaglass

screens shattered, but here and there you could make out the oddness of the decor – the sweeps, the curves, the little details that were hard to look directly at without your eye slipping away out of instinct. Under the surface smells of smoke and sweat, odder aromas still hung around, some sweet, some so bitter it made your sinuses itch.

Hegain and his troopers went through the chambers methodically, running scans then rooting through the refuse. Spinoza moved along the central corridor and into what looked like the main living area. The hab was a big one – far bigger than a standard worker would ever have been allocated. The man who had lived here had been rich and powerful. Why he had chosen to live in such a run-down zone was a mystery. Maybe he'd liked it. Crowl had liked Salvator. A strange breed, the servants of the ordos – herself included.

The living area was deserted. Dead plants, their withered leaves black and straggling, had been piled up behind the jagged edges of a large internal window. Spinoza started to run the battery of augur scans she'd prepared. The valuables had been looted, of course, but so much trash remained that something important might still have been missed.

After a while, Hegain came to join her.

'Habitation unit is secured, lord,' he reported.

She looked up. 'He was here?' she asked.

Hegain nodded. 'The signals were somewhat hard to isolate, in truth, amid all the goings and the comings. But yes, to be sure of it, he was here.'

She nodded and turned back to her work, filtered through the ash heaps and scraps. A long piece of bone – an animal tusk, maybe – lay in pieces on the floor. Bloodstains still darkened the walls, some of them new, most dry and old.

'Anything that might carry a trace,' she said, repeating an earlier order. 'Stack items for transit in the vestibule.'

Hegain bowed and moved off to the refectory chambers, and she continued with her own filtering. Despite the overriding decrepitude, the faint air of menace began to get under her skin after a while. Some of the objects, even when broken into pieces, were clearly of proscribed origin and smelled unsettling. This was a foul place, a place where foul things had been stored and foul ideas incubated.

Spinoza pushed on through the trash, hating every minute of it. She took

up what looked like an old weapon – a curved knife made of some substance she couldn't identify. She shook out caskets that might once have held jewels or coins, checking nothing had been left behind. After discarding one such container, she startled herself by catching a reflection in the shattered glass of a handheld mirror that had lain underneath it. The flecks of silvered material still clamped in place around the bronze rim looked like irregular teeth around an oval mouth, and as her helm-lumens flashed across the pieces she felt for a terrible moment like Crowl himself were staring back at her from them, only that it wasn't quite Crowl, but a bizarre and twisted version of him with black-in-black eyes and bone-grey flesh, broken up across the shards.

She controlled herself, pushed the fancies out of her mind. She took up the mirror to investigate further. It didn't look of Terran origin. Something about the lustre to the bronze made her think it was probably xenos. Why had it been destroyed? Maybe just trodden underfoot in the general violence that had destroyed the hab, though it certainly looked like someone had gone after it with some determination. In the dim and shifting light, she didn't like her own reflection shown up in its residual shards – an armour-clad brute, crunching and pushing through heaps of alien spoil.

And yet, in that one fleeting moment, she had almost cried out in recognition, as if he could possibly have been there, lost in the mirror's depths, beckoning her inside with him, ready to make amends for everything he, and she, had done.

She drew in a deep breath, bagged the mirror for further study and kept going, hoping for something tangible. More rubbish was sifted through, all thrown aside, until she reached out for the burned remains of a book – a traditional book, with a synth-leather cover and charred parchment leaves. She opened it and flicked through the torn pages. Notes had been scrawled across every inch in a cramped script, much of it hard to make out. The legible text was mundane, for the most part – references to old mission documents, items to requisition, reminders to apply for ration cards. She almost put it down again, but then something caught her eye – a diagram, sketched hastily, as if a copy from some other document. Runes were plastered across it, though none of them were Gothic. Not particularly surprising, given what Spinoza knew of her subject's occupation and interests, but useful nonetheless.

She closed the book, reached for another item bag, and sealed it up. Then she straightened, flexed her stiff muscles, looked out across the rest of the chamber.

Six days ago. He must have been rooting through the very same rubbish, searching for much the same set of clues. Or maybe he had given up and gone elsewhere. Or maybe he had destroyed the place himself. Was this a dead-end? Or just the start they needed to make? And should she even be doing it, given all the other calls on her time?

She smiled grimly to herself.

‘Damn you,’ she muttered, reaching to retrieve the book and the mirror before moving off to look for more scraps. ‘You don’t shake me off that easily.’

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CHAPTER TWO

Six days. A long time to be without the inquisitor, given all that had happened.

Maldo Revus had argued that the search should have started earlier. The day after he went missing, in fact. Spinoza had been sympathetic, but other factors had weighed against it. The streets of Salvator were scenes of pitched battles between spontaneously erupting heretic cults and a panicked, frenzied populace. The enforcers were overwhelmed, Militarum regiments nowhere to be found. Courvain, still badly damaged from the attack by Franck's private army, remained vulnerable, and all hands were needed to keep the portals secure.

The fighting became intense after that. It had been exhausting work, keeping the outer barbicans free of the rabble – the few survivors of the Forbidden Fortress raid had been pressed straight back into service, still fragile after what they had witnessed inside that place. Respite of any kind, even for a moment, had been impossible. The world was coming to its end, and all they could do was meet it with exhaustion.

There was another factor in delaying, of course. Things had been strained between inquisitor and interrogator for some time. For all Revus knew,

Crowl was simply seeking some time on his own, away from the second-guessing, doubt and suspicion, away from the responsibilities of command for just a few precious moments. When the choice had been forced on him in the Fortress, Revus had opted for Spinoza over Crowl, a decision that still made him wince. All of them, save Khazad, had done the same. No reckoning had taken place for that yet. Was that, then, why Revus wanted to find him so badly? To make amends for the break? Or perhaps to discover that some breaches of trust could not be healed, and that he had better start thinking, if he were to survive all this, about a change of placement?

Whatever the truth of all that, the citadel still felt empty without Crowl's bleak, quiet presence in it. The old master had held the place together in ways that had never been obvious before. You had always known that he was around, somewhere, reading a book by candlelight in the high chambers, or busy in the cells with suspects, or limping down to the barracks to check on the progress of new recruits. He had never been a warm man to serve, nor a physically inspiring commander, but he had been fair, and he had been judicious, and, at least until the recent business with the xenos, he had been predictable.

That was all Revus really demanded of those he served. Now, though, everything was upended. Crowl remained absent, his mind possibly suffering still, his judgement skewed. Terra had entered a spiral of decline that seemed to have no conceivable mending. Somehow, those who remained needed to gather what was left of their strength, stop merely fending off destruction and make a decision about what to do next. Because Crowl might have been right, however erratic his judgement had become. The conspiracy that had come to dominate the man's every waking thought might still be something that needed to be stopped, and his own lingering retinue might still be the only ones in any kind of position to do so. Or maybe that was exactly the wrong thing to do. Maybe their duty now lay elsewhere, in the fight to retain a precarious control over the species' home world, forgetting about a xenos conspiracy that was being played out – if at all, still – at levels far above their heads.

All decisions were dangerous, now. All paths might be the wrong ones.

Revus made his way down through the narrow corridors of the old citadel, hearing the stone and iron creak around him. The dim, ambient roar that always penetrated its depths was quieter than it used to be – so few

transports in the air and out on the viaducts around them. Candles guttered in their alcoves, heaped with semi-hardened wax. The last tang of the poisons Spinoza had unleashed could still be detected in the deeper crevices, a reminder of her capacity to make the hard decisions. She had only released them when she had been given no other choice, faced with either losing the entire Fortress or using the citadel's implanted chem-weapons to flush out Franck's invading army, but the consequences of the decision still resonated, adding further friction to the relationships between them all.

Revus limped heavily into Erunion's chambers, carrying wounds still from both the Forbidden Fortress raid and more recent skirmishes. The chirurgeon had been kept as busy as the rest of them, coping first with the fallout from the invasion, then keeping Revus' garrison patched up and able to defend the gates. The long rows of examination tables, designed for autopsies, flexed now under the weight of the wounded.

'Who can you give me back?' Revus asked him as he entered, glancing up at the lenses perched over a stack of clicking bio-stabilisers. Regular, soft bleeps sounded from further in, marking the clockwork progress of blood cyclers in operation. A brace of apothecarion cherubs clutching philtres floated past, their blank, impish faces oblivious to anything but their current taskings.

'No one,' said Erunion, lifting his scrawny pate up as Revus entered, then getting back to work. His forearms were splattered with blood, as was his plastek apron. A trooper lay on the slab between them, unconscious, face hidden behind a tangle of rebreather tubes, his breastplate and jerkin stripped away from a nasty-looking gash running from his stomach to his armpit. 'As soon as any of them can hold a gun without falling straight over, I'll let you know.'

Revus grunted sourly. He was irritable, he knew – made fractious by lack of sleep, lack of proper food, lack of company. 'Stitch faster,' he said. 'I've got squads who haven't been rotated out for three days.'

Erunion chuckled dryly. 'Lucky them. I've been on my feet for a week.' He looked up for a brief moment, peering hard at Revus' scarred face. 'I could give you some stimms. Mild enough. Keep you sharp.'

It was tempting. Revus knew many of his own troopers were dosing, most of them within limits he could pretend not to know about. But it was

something he'd never liked, not for them, and certainly not for him. 'No, not where I'm going,' he said.

'And where's that?' Erunion said, getting back to work.

'The old hunting grounds. To start asking questions.'

'No one'll be talking. Throne of Mercy, no one's *alive* out there.'

'It has to be done, and we've waited long enough.' Revus sucked in a breath. 'So I need to know. How long can he last?'

Erunion never missed a beat – just tugged at the sutures, applied the micro-scalpel, administered anticoagulants. 'I can't tell you that, captain.'

'Come on. The time for those secrets passed long ago.'

Erunion paused again, pushing his spectacles up a long nose. 'I don't know,' he said. 'You want the truth? He should have died years ago. I never knew how he kept going. And since that… thing. The xenos. Hells – I don't understand it at all.'

'He left without taking supplies.'

'He did.'

'So it'll be getting worse.'

Erunion scratched at his neck. 'You'd think so. But what do you want me to do?'

'Give me what he needs. I'll take it to him.'

'If he wants to be found,' said Erunion. 'And that's the only way you'll get to him. But, by all means, I'll brew something up, for all the good it'll do.'

Revus felt his irritation rise. 'It'll be everything, if it keeps him alive.'

Erunion shrugged. 'Will it? Everything? I mean, we *have* an inquisitor here, as good as. One who, they tell me, you were happy to support, when the moment came.' Revus took an ominous step towards the table, but Erunion carried on his work, unconcerned. 'Things are changing, captain. I can see that, even stuck down here. Maybe this is for the best, given what we know now.' The chirurgeon glanced up one final time, before reaching for a fresh loop of skinwire. 'She was here, when we needed her. She's still working, still giving commands. Think on that. Maybe that's the important thing.'

Revus stared at him for a moment longer. He'd never liked Erunion, despite the many times he'd sewn him back up after an action, always dragging him back into peak condition with a minimum of fuss. Maybe the chirurgeon was right, though. The world changed. Sometimes not for

the worse.

‘Prepare the doses,’ Revus said, not wanting to think about it, needing to make preparations of his own. ‘I’ll come to collect.’

Then he turned on his heel and walked out, eager to get the stench of antisep out of his nostrils.

‘And make them resilient,’ he growled. ‘It was bad out there before. Now it’s the very hells.’

Shoba. Death world. World of night and fire, set far into the deep void, hard to discover at the best of times, now impossibly out of reach.

Niir Khazad was not a sentimental woman. None of her people were, especially those trained in the formal killing arts, but there were still times when her mind returned to the old place – its ruined cities, forever shrouded in darkness; the cold nights that shimmered with half-heard voices; the silver face of the moon riding high, its lone eye silently watchful.

It had been a ghost world, a world of privation and purity, half-cordoned off from the teeming masses of the Imperium, lost in its own obscure subsector and away from the big warp lanes. To those who lived there, most in total ignorance that there was anything more to the galaxy than their strange twilight existence, it was a place of both cruelty and wonder, impossibly demanding, hard to survive, but starkly beautiful, unyielding, severe and majestic.

And now this place. The world she had never wanted to come to, and certainly never expected to linger on. She could have taken the chance to leave, and would have done so readily had it not been for Crowl, but now the opportunity was gone. In the aftermath she felt like a caged animal, caught in a snare partly of her own making. All around her was filth – human degeneracy, weak and flabby, wallowing in a mire of sinfulness and indolence. The smell was impossible to scrub off – the stale sweat, the perfumes and the illnesses, all mingled up into the soup of smog that crept under every doorway and slunk across every sill.

This was a world where knives were sewn up within clothing rather than carried openly, a world where the masters of the Imperium were as much at war with one another as with any external enemy. This was a world of lies, of compromises, of shabbiness and distraction. An honest soul could look at it and only feel contempt.

She drew out her own blade, and began the exercise again. Around her, candleflames shivered as her limbs moved. Her cell in Courvain's upper levels was not large, and her fingertips grazed the old stone. The knife-edge flashed, turning deftly in her loose grip, a little faster than she had managed the last time.

Her speed was returning, though it was a hard slog, working her way back to full fitness. After the raid on the Palace, her physical wounds had been severe. This time around, it was the damage done to her mind that lingered. Whatever that woman had done to keep her locked in place as Crowl spoke to the Traitor High Lord had stayed with her. She remembered almost nothing of the retreat from the Fortress. Days of forgetfulness had followed, each of them filled with vile dreams. Only now was she returning to herself, able to wield a weapon again, to defend herself, to fight once more.

But for what? Now that Crowl was gone, what purpose did she have here? Hard to know. She had been the only one to stand by him at the end, when it mattered the most, and now that seemed to count for nothing. Just another betrayal, one to fuel her smouldering sense of abandonment.

She finished her exercises, panting deeply, her combat suit drenched in sweat. Light-headed, she staggered over to her cot and sat down heavily. More work needed to be done before she headed out into the city again. She placed her hands together, lowered her head, and prepared for the mental rites, the rites from her home world, the ones that calmed her mind and accelerated the healing process.

Then the chime at her door sounded. She snapped straight back into the present, annoyed. She knew who it would be, though. A menial had already told her that a Nighthawk had docked an hour ago, so it was only a matter of time. She didn't want to do it, not now. But it would have to happen at some point, and there was no sense in just waiting forever.

Khazad took a breath.

'Come,' she said.

Spinoza entered, still in her armour, carrying all the patina and the stink of the world beyond with her. 'You look better,' she said approvingly.

Khazad smiled to herself. Crowl would have found a better way to put it, a way that didn't imply that she was still badly out of condition. 'Work in progress,' she said.

Spinoza stood stiffly in the centre of the room. She always looked so ill at

ease, so formal, like she was still working out how to be a person herself, let alone how to relate to others. ‘We have not spoken, you and I,’ she said. ‘Not properly.’

Yes, that had been deliberate. Aside from the factual debriefing, corroborating what had taken place in that central chamber, there had been nothing constructive to say. ‘But you wish to, now.’

‘The search has started. I need to know when… *if* I can make use of you.’

‘Why you think not?’

Spinoza sighed. ‘You will force me to say it?’

Khazad shook her head. No point in rehearsing the facts of the case. She had never been a true member of the retinue, bound by oaths and contracts. She had only stayed because she respected Crowl, and now his people had turned against him, and that was a problem they both were fully aware of.

‘You wish to find him,’ Khazad said, looking at Spinoza hard. ‘I wish to find him.’

‘We have a greater chance if we work together, just as before.’

‘Oh, as when you refused his order, eh?’

Spinoza didn’t react. ‘The Fortress was affecting him. It was affecting all of us.’

‘No, you, all of you, do not help him. You walk away. And now, *now*, you need my help to put all right.’

‘He told me, before he left, plain as anything, that I had been right. He told me that. He knew the madness was at him, and admitted the fault.’

‘Then he left.’

‘Yes, he left. But maybe he wished to come back. Did you think of that? It is dangerous out there, and he was alone.’

‘Because you let him go.’

‘How could I not?’

Khazad snorted. ‘Because you make the choice! You have no problem with that, I think. You make choice all the time. You *never* have problem with that.’

Now Spinoza was angry in turn, Khazad could see – the surface control was still there, but behind those eyes, she had started to simmer.

‘I will not justify those actions to you, assassin. I justify myself only to the Throne.’

Khazad stood up, her fists balled, and for a moment it was just like it had

been when they had first encountered one another, two matched blades. ‘Yes, though, that is your problem,’ she said. ‘You do not *think*. Not like he. There would have been other way. To keep fighting, not make others suffer for your mistake. He would have found solution, if we had waited. Look at this place.’

For an instant, Khazad thought Spinoza might lunge at her. Part of her wanted it to happen. Break the tension, release some energy through doing what they were both so good at. The interrogator still had her youthful anger inside her, her energy and her passion, and an assassin could respect that more than this slavish following of laws and procedures.

In the end, though, Spinoza never moved. Her expression remained taut, her mouth a tight line.

‘All I need to know,’ she said, deliberately, ‘is whether I can make use of you. If not, you may go your own way. No oaths bind you to us.’

Khazad shook her head dismissively. ‘Where would I go?’ she muttered. ‘Where is left?’

‘If that is what matters to you, then you must find out yourself.’

Khazad looked up at Spinoza. She saw the fatigue in the woman’s posture, but also the residual strength. She was as dogged as any fighter she’d ever met, the kind to spit in fate’s eye even as the blade was driven in. For a while, Khazad had respected that. But then the betrayals had come – the people of the citadel, then its master.

Shoba was not a forgiving world, and neither were its children.

‘I hunt for him, yes,’ Khazad said coldly, leaving no room for doubt over her feelings. ‘Not because you order it, or anyone orders it, because *I* choose it. That is offer. Take it, leave it. And I work alone.’

Spinoza thought on it. In another time, Khazad knew, that would have been insurrection, the kind of thing that would get her either banished or castigated. An interrogator knew how to bring recalcitrant souls around – that was their job, among other duties. But what could she do, now? They were barely clinging on, stretched thin, a mere slip away from erasure.

You had to work with what was in front of you, make the compromises you could. This wasn’t Shoba, after all. This was Terra.

‘So be it,’ said Spinoza sharply. ‘Do as you will.’

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CHAPTER THREE

Spinoza returned wearily to her chambers. As she walked up the narrow stairwells, comm-bursts continually flickered across the receiver at her collar – more running battles at the south gates, reports of a big explosion in the hive-cluster to the east, Hegain returning to duty and attempting to restart one of the old lascannon towers.

Her armour felt heavy against her body, dragging her down rather than strengthening her. For a long time, she had felt nothing but pride in the battleplate she wore. It was a product of Tur's exceptional armoury, a symbol of the ancient prowess of the eternal Imperium. Going into battle with it on had made her feel like an extension of that prowess – a small but vital part of the greater armour that shielded the Emperor and kept the glory of the species alive. You could not doubt it – it was flawless, immutable, the way of things now and forever.

She had never been a simpleton. She had always known that some governors were weak or corrupt, that some ministers to the Throne, even senior ones, were fallible. And yet, an essential element to her outlook had been that the core was sacred. That those who had been charged with the holiest duties of all – enacting the Emperor's divine will – were the very

best of humankind. They were exceptional, untroubled by weakness or pride, given over entirely to their eternal and ancient service. The Space Marines she had fought with had been like that. Rough around the edges, sure, violent beyond belief, but selfless with it in an almost childlike sense.

When Crowl had sown his seeds of cynicism, she had balked at it. She had never truly believed his words, thinking them the product of an old, tired mind, one that had been steeped in the corrosive liquor of Terra's atmospheres for too long. It was no wonder that he had begun to lose his faculties – once a soul turned from certainty, the mind was liable to lose its way too.

For herself, she had to believe. To retain the faith. This was a test. Everything – the disorder, the loss of the Beacon, the dismantling of Courvain's little world – it was a test. You had to stand firm, mouth the catechisms, prevent yourself from even listening to the whispers of doubt. Everyone was tired, strung-out. It was in such circumstances that error crept in and heresy took root. Here, of all places, that could not be allowed to happen. It had to be held together.

Spinoza reached the heavy doors to her rooms, opened them, went inside. As modest as ever – bare walls, scattered candles, the reassuring presence of Argent hanging in the corner. The crozius arcanum was huge and heavy even powered down, encrusted with holy runes, proclaiming its lethality the whole time. The air was gritty and hot, just as always, and that almost came as a comfort now.

She sat on the edge of her cot and slumped forward. Slowly, she pulled her gauntlets off, then rubbed her eyes with sweaty fingers.

Why, in truth, she asked herself, did she absolutely need to find him? Revus was desperate to do so, driven by both guilt and old loyalty. Hegain likewise, Aneela too, and all the garrison troopers felt the same way. Khazad had the strangest bond with him of all, a tie that was as strong as it was surprising. But none of them were in command now. She was. And she had not been here long enough to make retrieval a foregone conclusion. Other options existed. She could have seen Courvain dissolved and taken all its surviving assets north to the Sanctum to take part in its defence. She could have pronounced the old master gone for good and taken over herself, to run things as they always ought to have been run.

What prevented her from doing that? Hard to say. Maybe the fragile spark

of affection that had briefly kindled between them – his honesty with her, her appreciation of his idiosyncratic breed of loyalty. Or maybe she thought she could repair the damage that had been done to him by the xenos and restore him to full service. That would be a noble action in itself, one that both the ordo and the Church would sanction.

Or maybe, most troubling of all, was the thought that he had been right. Something *was* rotten at the summit of Imperial power, a festering sore of heresy that had lain hidden for years, only to be obscured now by the greater crisis that engulfed everything else. She had always gone along with Crowl's investigation, serving faithfully, never quite buying it, right up until that moment at the Fortress when her hand had been forced.

But still, even now, she had to believe the old truth. She had to believe that the High Lord, the Master of the Astronomican, had in some way acted correctly. She had to believe that there had been a *reason* for what seemed like madness. Because if the Throne were truly failing, if what the xenos had said had been true, if Rassilo had been right, if Gloch had been right, then the enemy here was not the Council, was not the pain-bringers, but was Crowl himself. He was the danger. He needed to be taken out. Not that she would ever have told Revus that, nor any of the others. Not that she even believed it herself, not entirely. But the chance was there.

So that was the truth of it: she needed to find him, not to redeem him, nor to end him, but to ensure the danger was averted. Until that moment, until she knew the entirety of the situation, all she was doing was what any good interrogator had to do – probe, push, examine, question. It couldn't be left hanging, and it couldn't be palmed off to another branch of the Inquisition. This was her burden, and hers alone.

A sound came from the open doorway – a scuff of a boot on the stone. She looked up to see Aneela there.

'Your pardon, lord,' said the pilot. 'Reporting all material stowed as ordered, ready for examination.'

'Thank you.'

'So, unless there's anything else–'

'No, no. Get some rest. You've been most helpful. Start on it after that.'

Aneela turned to leave.

'Wait.' Spinoza beckoned her in. 'Sit, for a moment.'

Warily, Aneela complied. She looked around, found a metal stool to perch

on.

‘You served with him a long time, yes?’ Spinoza asked.

‘Six years.’

So many of the staff here were long-serving, despite service in the ordos being very dangerous. For all his faults, Crowl had made them loyal and kept plenty of them alive.

‘So what am I missing, Aneela?’ she asked.

‘What are you…? Forgive me, I do not–’

‘It’s as if he never existed. No trails, no clues. But maybe it’s just that I never knew him very well, so I’m looking in the wrong places. You know him. Where would you start?’

Aneela pursed her lips. ‘Just where you have been looking, lord. Just what you’ve been doing.’

‘I’m not seeking affirmation.’

‘I know. If I had anything else, I’d offer it.’ She looked uncomfortable then. ‘Six years. But I wouldn’t say I ever knew him. Not really. I trusted him. I believe he trusted me. That counts for something. I could anticipate certain instructions, guess what orders might be coming, but that was it. And it was enough. I never asked for more.’

That was how it was, of course. You didn’t last long in the Imperium by *asking more*. You kept your head down, followed orders, hoped that your superior wasn’t a tyrant or a sadist, because if they were, there was nothing much you could do about it.

‘Then we must just do what we can,’ Spinoza said, smiling dryly. ‘And hope our guesses are good ones.’

Aneela got up, then clearly had a thought, one that she hesitated to voice. ‘They say he was not always so… close,’ she said.

‘Yes, that was expressed to me many times when I first got here,’ Spinoza said. ‘Not much good to us now, though, is it?’

‘It might be.’

Spinoza looked up at her quizzically. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The old master, Palv. The two of them were of like mind.’

‘That too has been said. How does it help?’

‘Because… You must know this, though. Maybe not. You could, if you wished…’ Aneela collected herself. ‘I am not saying it would yield much of value. We all know what remains is compromised. But if you thought it

would be of service, you could speak to him. Because he’s here. The old lord of Courvain. He’s always been here.’

It was as if the apocalypse had already come, Revus thought, and they were merely living through the aftermath. As he made his way down, down into the hot heart of the old city, the spire flanks above him reared up as dark as burned metal, their thousands of windows unlit, their hundreds of access portals gaping open like parched mouths.

He’d spoken to Spinoza briefly before leaving. Revus’ network of contacts in the underhives of Salvator was extensive and had been built with Crowl’s active help over the years. Some of them would still be alive, maybe hunkering down in their own fortified chambers and towers, waiting for the anarchy to ease. Crowl might have gone to one of them, or, if not, one of them might know something about where he had gone. Slim chances, of course, but worth a shot.

He’d taken a groundcar out, not one of the operational gunships – that would also have attracted more attention, since so few were being used in the aftermath of the worst violence. He stowed and secured the vehicle while still a long way from his destination, and went the rest of the way on foot. He was arrayed for a full warzone – storm trooper armour, close-fitting panels of carapace plate, unreflective and as black as soot, a helm with image-enhancement, magnoculars and broad-spectrum auspex capability. He had two combat knives strapped to his calves, a brace of blind grenades, krak charges and agony-gas canisters at his belt, a Cadian-pattern hellpistol held loosely in his gauntlet.

Just getting out of Courvain, getting back to what he did best, lifted his mood. He could stretch his limbs, still stiff from his exertions at the Fortress, but recovering fast.

In some ways, ironically, he felt better than he had for some time. He had fought alongside the Imperial Fists. Not for long, true, and those precious moments had been punishingly hard, but just enough to feel that he’d contributed. They had been closer to him, in most respects, than the unearthly Custodians that had so dented his confidence. They had spoken like men, not like demigods, with the same kind of blunt, snapped commands familiar to him from his schola training. You could imagine fighting with them for a long time, learning from them, getting sharper and

stronger from mere proximity. During the recent scratchy, wretched combat at Courvain's intake portals, where the garrison had had to drive back waves of starving or raving cultists, Revus had more than once placed his mind back into those frenetic moments of pure combat with the Astartes, that rolling wave of aggression that just ate up everything in front of it, and tried to replicate it as best he could.

The Emperor's Angels. He could see why Spinoza venerated them so much. When his inevitable end came, then it would be enough for him to go out in combat next to one of them. He suspected that the interrogator felt much the same.

For now, though, he was far from that, immersed again into his old element – the low-sunk streets, overlaid with a criss-cross of multilevel viaducts and grav-platforms, the chasms and the gulfs, the seamy thoroughfares and the drifting miasmas. A thousand bodies should have been crammed into every scrap of space down there, but now it was just wreckage and ashes. The few bodies he noticed in the murk weren't moving. Alongside the ever-present stink of engine oil, he could detect an underlying stratum of copper, much more pronounced than it had ever been before. Every vista was clouded with thick palls of smoke, rolling slowly through the narrow crevasses between spires, so much so that even his night-vision lenses struggled to give him a wholly clear view ahead. Tattered banners and fabric scraps tumbled along empty rockcrete walkways. Refuse piled up in open doorways, abandoned groundcars littered the transitways.

He kept to the shadows, knowing that his armour made him all but invisible in such conditions. Trusting to memory, he went swiftly, passing down into the deeper gloom of the underpasses and rat-runs, skirting any sounds of ongoing disorder and keeping to the quiet ways. Glimpses down long chasms showed the angry glow of distant fires, bleeding into the perma-night like bloody wounds. Atmospherics passed overhead twice, both times convoys of military aircraft, dark-hulled and stuffed with guns, racing from one crisis to the next.

He tripped on some rubble at his feet, and looked down to see a smashed ouslite aquila, hurled from hundreds of storeys up. He hesitated for a moment, made angry by the desecration. If he'd had his troopers with him, he would have ordered them to drag the pieces back together, at least

restore some semblance of respect.

The day would come. The aquilas would be hoisted back up to the pinnacles, floodlit again, gazing stonily out over the imperfections of the Imperium as a reminder of the adamantium at its core. Those who had given in to fear would be punished. There had been storms of doubt before; this, too, would pass.

He went down again, always down. The air became grittier, thicker, laced now with chems and toxins dredged up from the pits at the city's base. He was close to the old Tiyanya bio-reprocessing vats now, the giant cylinders and tube-nests buried a long way into the foundational sumps. Some of them were still in use, he knew, though the ordinances closing them down had been issued centuries ago. Everything felt sticky, viscous, poisonous.

He reached the end of a long walkway, and crouched down against a rusted metal railing. Curved carcasses of immense spire bases swept upward on every side of him, bleak and black. He could hear the fires crackle and spit. Figures were shuffling through the darkness a few metres off – cowled and rag-covered, limping and scared. He ignored those – just underhive scavengers, trying to scamper away as fast as their sore-addled legs would take them.

He glanced up briefly, peering into the drifting filth in response to an augur blip. Something high in the smog, maybe? A slight shift, as if something had disturbed the cloudbanks? He waited a little longer. Nothing. Just his imagination.

His gaze shifted down again. Straight ahead, the walkway dropped sharply. At its terminus, a bizarre bulbous construction hung between spindly scaffolds, egg-shaped, iron-clad, gaping darkly from a few unsealed portal hatches. It was a private hab of some kind, big enough to house a few dozen, and its flanks were laced with autocannon slits. Those looked to be out of action. Indeed, it seemed as if the place was wrecked, depowered entirely, just as much of the neighbourhood was. There must have been backup generatoria at some stage, but those had evidently failed too, or perhaps had been deactivated.

Revus had been inside that building many times. Space was tight inside, deliberately so – the man who had built it had cared about his security, ensuring that any intruders would have to tread carefully and go slowly.

He observed the exterior for a few moments longer, checking for any signs

of movement. When none came, he crept silently down the walkway towards the construction's main portal. Old iron blast doors had been driven inward, the lock-units shattered. Revus pressed himself up against the right-hand edge of the breach, adjusted the harmonics on his helm's augur, and ran a scan. After a blurt of interference, a translucent web of positive signals glowed into life across his combat-sights. He noted the position of each in turn, where they would move when disturbed, how the internal web of corridors and chambers stood in relation to one another, then took up weapons – a krak charge for his left hand, the hellpistol for his right.

Then he slipped across the threshold, hugging the inner wall of the vestibule beyond. The interior was almost perfectly dark. Spatters of blood lay everywhere, picked up as black slicks by his night vision, indicating blasts from solid-round fire. A short corridor ran directly ahead, which then forked left and right. Revus reached the junction, primed the krak charge and tossed it into an empty chamber to the left. As it clanked down into the darkness, he walked swiftly down the right fork and turned the corner.

Two seconds later, the charge blew, shattering the silence and making the hab's metal interior rock. Shouting broke out from further in, followed by the clang and clatter of boots running. Revus walked calmly away from it all, marking the movement of the heat signatures as they scrambled to respond. He reached the end of the corridor just as the end door slid open. Two figures burst out, both men in civilian worker-drab, almost certainly gangers or looters, carrying poorly made projectile weapons. Revus shot them before they even caught sight of him – two las-bolts into two exposed foreheads. He stepped over the twitching corpses and pressed on inside.

The rest of the signals were all moving fast now, racing towards the chamber hit by the charge, most taking a different corridor looping around the far side of the interior tangle. Revus encountered three more gangers in the next chamber and dispatched them with four snap-shots – one for each of them, plus an extra bolt for the sparking lock-unit on the hatch portal leading further in. He pressed on.

The shouts echoing down the corridors became panicked. A generator coughed into life and some lumens flickered on, dimly lighting up the condensation-rich interior. The occupants of this place were neither trained nor disciplined – they heard a disturbance, they ran towards it. Revus calmly watched the signals scattering across his scanner, gauging the

moment to bring them together again.

He dispatched a sixth ganger in the corridor beyond with another hellpistol shot, then reached for a blind grenade. He stepped through a hatch and entered a larger chamber piled with ration packs and storage crates. The lone fighter stationed there at least had the sense to use the plentiful cover, crouching behind an upturned table and spraying bullets at him. Revus dropped down low, found an angle and shot her in the shoulder – enough to send her spinning into the far wall but not enough to kill her. The ganger screamed, then garbled something wildly into her comm-unit. Revus gave her just long enough to get the message out, then shot her again, silencing the tirade. After that he rolled the blind grenade into the centre of the chamber and took cover again.

It was only a few moments before the rest of them came charging in, shouting out mindless battle cries as if they fancied themselves as Space Marines. Revus held off until they were all within range before detonating the charge, flooding the chamber with nerve-burning white light and ushering screams of sudden agony. Once his photoreactive helm-visor had cleared, he stowed his hellpistol and reached for a knife – no sense wasting power on enemies that were now permanently sightless. He moved from one body to the next, slicing throats methodically, eliminating the source of each agonised scream until it was quiet again.

A final check on the augurs to make sure he hadn’t missed any, and the work was done. He moved off to another hatch on the chamber’s inner wall. In his wake, the mass of bodies lay silently in the flickering dark.

One chamber remained, guarded by a circular access hatch. Revus blew the lock and pushed open a heavy door. The space on the far side stank of fear, human excreta and confinement. Its single occupant had once been fat, but his grey flesh now hung flabbily from his bones. He wore a stained set of robes, and crusted scabs marked where both augmetics and jewellery had been ripped from his face and hands. A heavy chain kept him shackled to the far wall. He was clearly weak and traumatised, but at least had the wherewithal to look Revus in the eye.

‘They’ve already taken anything of value,’ he croaked. ‘But if you can find something else to trash, then be my guest.’

Revus slid his visor across. ‘Really, Gulagh. I look like a looter?’ He drew out a carb-bar and a water canister, dropped down to his haunches and gave

both to the man.

Raf Gulagh, once a servant of many inquisitors – a processor of corpses and other disposable evidence – looked briefly startled, then took them greedily, gulping down the water and then attacking the carb-bar with gusto.

Revus severed the man's chains and took a look around. The room had been richly, if tastelessly, appointed. There had been banks of entertainment lenses, cold-storage for luxuries, a plush bed and furniture. Most of it had been stripped out now, and all that remained were tatters of fabric and some half-mouldy ration packs. 'How did they get in?'

'Power outage,' said Gulagh, still eating rapidly. His hands were shaking. 'Couldn't get the backup online, and they sniffed weakness.' He chewed. 'Can't blame them, really. There was food here. Held them off for four days before we ran out of bullets.'

'They kept you alive, though?'

'Strange, eh? Something to bargain with, maybe.' Gulagh snorted, and his wattle-chins wobbled. 'Could have been worse. There are stories of cannibalism out there. Even now, reduced as I am, I'd keep a family going for a while.' He swallowed, painfully. His exposed flesh was covered in weals. 'Didn't realise Crowl thought that highly of me. In the rescue business, is he now?'

'Not quite. We don't know where he is. I hoped you might.'

Gulagh let out a long breath. 'Ah. No, I can't help you. I would, if I could. Always liked him. A little, anyway.' He tried to push himself off the floor, and failed. 'Caught in the fighting, was he?'

'On assignment.' Revus stood up and started to root through the wreckage of the chamber, pushing at the jumble of broken objects with his boot-tip. 'Maybe trying to get off-world.'

'No, not that,' said Gulagh, firmly. 'They closed the ports. I tried to get out too, before it got really bad. Had to turn back.'

'That's what we heard. No surviving routes you know of?'

'You think I'd still be here? No, it's destruction orders now – Navy ships taking out anything aiming for the Mandeville belt. Don't know if that's true, mind. But it wouldn't surprise me. Holy Throne, what a mess.'

'I need to locate him. For obvious reasons. Anything you can tell me, Gulagh?'

Gulagh thought hard. 'Not much. Haven't seen him since… Well, there

was a body, in one of his batches. Shouldn't have been there. Crowl took it, and so I expected to hear back. Never did. I kept my head down. You probably know all about it. That was the last of it. We had more batches in, from the usual sectors, all for processing. And then this… trouble. We shut down the labs, locked ourselves in here, tried to keep it out. I wouldn't have heard anything after that, even if he'd been sniffing around – comms went down, power went down. And why would he come here, anyway? What's he after?'

'This is his sector – a contact, maybe. Someone who could help him get what he needs.'

'Which you don't know about.'

'Evidently.'

'If I were him, I'd have gone north. Get to the Sanctum. They'd let him in, surely, if he made it that far.'

'Possible.'

'There's still control there, they say. That's the hope anyway.'

'There's always hope,' said Revus, getting back to his feet.

'So, are you going back to Courvain?'

'Not yet.'

'Even so, any chance you could–'

'Take a weapon from the chamber outside – there are plenty. Here's more food. Keep out of sight – that's your best chance, until this thing blows over.'

Gulagh smiled sadly. 'I'd wish you luck, captain, but we seem to be clean out of it.'

Revus started to walk. 'Aye. For as long as I can remember.'

He picked his way out again, skirting around the bodies. Emerging back through the broken main portal and into the open again felt like immersion into just another kind of darkness. Except that, as he crossed the threshold, a flicker ran across his augur field, indicating something high up, lost in the dust and shift of the chasms overhead.

He didn't react to it. As soon as it had arrived, it was gone. He never looked up, never broke stride. But, far above him, where the smog boiled in turbulence between towers, he knew it would be just the same as it had been before – a brief tell in the smoke, a turbine judder, well hidden, well masked, but you couldn't hide absolutely everything, not from someone

with his equipment and his experience.

Whoever it was, they were pretty good. They had a decent craft, and they were careful. They might have been there for Gulagh, but that was unlikely – the man had been a low-key contact, just a small part of a network relied upon for the disposal of bodies. No, odds were, they were here for him, observing for now, waiting for their moment. But for what? To kill him? To take him in?

'So,' he murmured to himself, careful to move in exactly the same way as before, taking his time to reach any kind of cover. 'Who, then, are you?'

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CHAPTER FOUR

He’d taken up residence in Crowl’s own chambers. No one had attempted to stop him. He had hovered and blundered around in there for days, occasionally crashing into something, sometimes just hanging in the darkness, powered down, silent.

Like all of them, Gorgias had taken damage inside the Fortress. Erunion had fixed some of it, but the skull hadn’t hung around in the apothecarion for a full investigation. In any case, no one really knew how Gorgias worked. A tech-priest might have been able to advise, possibly, but there weren’t any of them in that sector of Terra, and possibly now not anywhere outside the Sanctum and the enclaves.

So they left him to his own devices. He did whatever a skull did when not pressed into service. He had whatever thoughts a skull had, felt whatever emotions a skull felt. Possibly he was simply a soulless device, now – a collection of mechanical parts with a smattering of machine-spirit burbling over the top. Or possibly something deeper remained, a lacing of something softer, older, harder to pin down.

In normal times, you wouldn’t even have asked. The Imperium wasn’t a place where mysteries were investigated – they were accepted, turned into

truths that couldn’t be questioned, slotted into the realm of the actual as life went on around them. Most servo-units, of any kind, were functionally inert – just floating gun-platforms or messenger-drones, their cranial matter repurposed for data-storage and environment targeting. Some, though, still spoke. Some still responded to emotional cues. A few were fully intelligible, able to recall memories, converse intelligently, express hopes and dreams. What was the cause of that? Some short-circuit in the devices that had been bolted into the bone? Or something else, more ineffable, lingering like a dream over cold matter?

For the most diligent servants of the Imperium, the greatest horror of all was death. Not because of what it meant for the individual, but because it took away the chance of service. The most devoted adepts, once the certainty of their demise became apparent, would petition earnestly for some means of carrying on, to use their remains to persist in the unending work of the Throne. And for those of high status – admirals, Chapter Masters, inquisitors – a way might sometimes be found – their heart placed into a reliquary and kept beating, their eyes crafted into augur-components, their lungs used for tox-filters. And for those who made the case most persuasively, or who had the most coin or influence with the tech-priests, their skull might be taken from their body, reverently prepared with oils and salves, implanted with grav-drives and powercells, the residual blobs of grey matter preserved and sealed, then threaded through with biowire and psycho-reactive crystals.

What emerged at the end of that process was always unique, always unknown, right until the moment the single oculus glowed into life again, the drives whined up to full power, the spinal matter clattered across the slab as the skull swayed up into the air. Many units never fully functioned at all. Others were little more than hovering cogitators, capable of retaining data and transmitting it on command.

Some, though, could speak. Some – it was whispered – had a mind, and a soul, of their own. Best not ask how, or why, or in what precise form that capability now existed. The Emperor knew. If it had happened, then He must have sanctioned it. Best now to get on with things, find a way to give the old occupant of that bone-and-metal casing what they had wanted in life – a way to keep on fighting.

Spinoza entered the chamber first. Erunion came with her. They closed the

doors behind them, then locked them.

Gorgias watched them come in, his oculus a dull brown.

‘Come here,’ said Spinoza, walking over to Crowl’s long table, taking a seat. Erunion remained standing. His spectacles glistened strangely in the candlelight, as if he’d placed new lenses over them.

Gorgias didn’t respond for a moment. When he finally moved, it was a sullen, grudging swagger, not the dart he would normally have made.

‘So,’ Spinoza said, once the skull was over the centre of the table. ‘We need to find him.’

Gorgias’ mechanisms clicked.

‘You wish to find him, too. I know you do. You were there with us. You made the same choice we did. Maybe that preys on you. This can all be remedied, but only if we determine his location.’

The skull hovered silently, a few pinpoint lumens strobing under its metallic jawline.

Erunion glanced at her sceptically. ‘As I said, I have already spoken to the skull. More than once.’

Spinoza ignored him, maintaining her gaze on Gorgias. ‘Can you feel regret?’ she asked. ‘Or is that just another illusion?’

She got up, pushing her chair back, edging around the table’s rim to come closer to the skull. Soon she was near enough to reach out and touch its needle-gun – not that she would ever have presumed.

‘They tell me Levi Palv’s ghost is in you still,’ Spinoza said. ‘They tell me that Crowl kept you around because the two of you could remember how it was when he was young and you were alive. You could talk to one another – or imagine it at least. Maybe you listened to that foul music he’s played at me more than once, trying to convince me that it’s not heretical garbage from an age best forgotten. An age he claimed to appreciate. So you know him better than anyone, to the extent you know anything any more.’

Gorgias’ oculus dimmed further, and the clicking inside him picked up in frequency.

‘You could render me some service, here. You could drag up something, anything, from your memory coils.’

Gorgias remained silent.

‘Just a spark. A beginning.’

Still silent.

Spinoza glanced up at Erunion. The chirurgeon folded his arms.

‘Nihil,’ Gorgias blurted, eventually. His oculus swelled back up into a lurid violet. ‘No *conceptionem*. *Anima* of old *magister defunctus. Defunctus. Todo* is *illusio.* Much mistaken.’

‘You are your own creature now, then,’ Spinoza said.

‘*Singularum*. All myself. *Completo.’*

‘Nothing remains of Palv? They told me it did.’

‘Solamente ossium. Spiritum, no-no. *Negativa en toto.’*

‘Even so. You have known him a long time. Is there nothing you can–’

‘*Sufficio!* No more. Nothing to tell.’ The skull looked distressed, and bobbed up higher, his oculus strobing. *‘Terminus.’*

Spinoza watched it intently. Erunion shook his head.

‘It seems I was mistaken, then,’ said Spinoza, resignedly. ‘I had hoped there was some link left, something more profound than any of us could share.’

She turned away, motioning for Erunion to follow. Just then, though, something clunked inside Gorgias, and the skull swivelled around on his axis. A coin-sized panel slid back, revealing a lithcaster nozzle. Spinoza halted, looking back at the table. Erunion stayed where he was.

A hololith emerged from the shadow, that familiar shimmer of yellow-green, thrown across the polished wood. It took a moment to stabilise. When it solidified, Spinoza caught an image of herself, standing in a chamber that looked very much like this one. The viewer-angle was from ahead of her. Crowl, a spectral fuzzy presence on the edge of the visual field, was speaking.

‘Maybe you even will, in time.’

‘Ignoro, child.’ That was Gorgias’ voice, coming from behind the lens. *‘Filth toto mundo. Burn-burn.’*

Spinoza saw her lithcast image raise an eyebrow.

‘This is Gorgias,’ came Crowl’s voice.

‘The skull has a different philosophy to yours, then,’ the Spinoza-image said.

‘It’s good to be faced with contrary views. Some of the time.’

Spinoza – the real one – placed her hands back on the tabletop. ‘This was when I first came here,’ she said to Gorgias. ‘The first time I met him. And

you. You recorded it?'

'Summum recordare.'

'Everything we said then?'

'Summum.'

Spinoza's gaze flicked up to Erunion. 'You might have told me it did this.'

The chirurgeon shrugged. 'I had no idea.'

Spinoza looked back at Gorgias. 'What else, then?'

The skull chittered for a while, and the hololith images started to cycle – one after the other, snatches of conversations, of chases, of actions in the cells, all from Gorgias' shifting point of view.

'Slower,' said Spinoza.

The sequences clarified. She saw Crowl running down a long tunnel, his coat-tails flapping amid curls of smoke, his master-crafted pistol, Sanguine, drawn, firing at something she couldn't make out. She heard the sounds of Gorgias' internal systems, far louder than in real life. Then the image shifted, and she saw Crowl kneeling over a body, placing his fingers up to its throat, feeling for a pulse. Then the perspective moved again, very rapidly, somewhere completely different – a chapel, it seemed. After that, yet another scene – somewhere in the Terran cityscape, maybe even Salvator.

'How far do these images go back?' she asked, finding herself strangely captivated by them.

Gorgias chuntered some more, and the hololith broke up into a haze of static. When the images re-emerged, they showed a younger man, one with smooth skin, tall, striding out confidently. It took her some time, amid all the shakiness of the hololith lines, to realise that this was Crowl too. He looked… healthy. The exposed skin of his face was smooth. He was not in Courvain. He was somewhere Spinoza didn't recognise.

Then another figure entered the viewfield – a woman, dressed in the uniform of a high-ranking adept, her robes bearing Imperial civil honours. Like Crowl, she looked young, vigorous, powerful. They appeared to be at some kind of space port terminal, from the look of the buildings around them.

'So it's settled, then,' Crowl was saying. *'Forfoda.'*

'You could come with me.'

'I plan to.'

The woman smiled knowingly. *‘When all’s done here.’*

Crowl took her hand in his. *‘It will be finished soon. I will come – I promise it.’*

The woman pulled him close to her. *‘This world will kill you, Erasmus. There are many ways, and places, in which to serve.’*

‘Truly. We will find them together.’

Spinoza couldn’t take her eyes off his face. Even allowing for the passage of time, for the vagaries of the hololith imagery, it was so profoundly changed. She had no idea how many years had passed, but the transformation was total. He was like a different man. He was free of agony. He was physically imposing. He was smiling, not with cynicism, but with pleasure.

The images stuttered out, replaced by more rapid cycling through storage, more snatches of actions, of combat, of interrogations.

She held her hand up. The hololith shuddered out of existence. ‘You recorded everything?’ she asked.

Gorgias bobbed up and down. ‘Some is *corrupto*. But yes-yes, *summum recordare*.’

‘And you can show me what you have?’

‘Affirmativo.’

‘Then we’ll start with what you retained following my arrival. When the xenos case began.’

Erunion looked doubtful. ‘Are you sure? All you’ll see is what the skull saw. Most of this we already know.’

Spinoza sat down next to Gorgias, opening up a data-slug for capture. ‘Then it will refresh my memory,’ she said curtly. ‘And perhaps uncover something we missed the first time.’

Erunion shrugged. ‘Very well. I will take my leave – I have bodies awaiting stitches below.’

Spinoza barely noticed him go. She instructed Gorgias to start transmission, and soon the chamber was flickering to the dance of the spectral images. She watched them, one by one, taking notes, observing carefully.

But at the back of her mind, all the time, whatever else she saw, was that tall man with the smile, full of life, free of care, as if ripped from the dream of another, impossible world.

Her own path. It felt good, to be tracing it again. Out above the urban wilds, flitting in her solo transport across the high places, the viaducts, the narrow spans across drops into curdled oblivion.

Khazad only gave her allegiance to those deserving of it – Phaelias, to start with; Crowl, after that. Spinoza… not yet. Too young, too straightforward, too unimaginative. Maybe guile would come to her in time, but only if she shook off that congenital belief in structure. It was *rules* that made the Imperium weak, at least insofar as they trumped a more natural human sense of courage and daring. Any sin could be justified by some law or other, some cold-hearted regulation that sanctified a retreat or trench collapse or battlefront withdrawal. In Spinoza's case, she could no doubt appeal to any number of precedents for what she had done in Courvain. Perhaps the entire place *would* have been destroyed if she had fought on. At least it would have been a fighting destruction, though, with men and women on their feet at the end, not choking on their own blood and ignorance.

And then there was Maldo Revus. A man she had admired as a fellow artisan of violence, one who had been strengthened by combat. He had failed twice now, though – by enabling the retreat at the citadel and by turning against his master at the moment of greatest crisis. Weakness, both times – the prioritisation of laws over sentiments, of regulation over right.

Throne only knew where Revus was now. She had irritated herself more than once by imagining how he was getting on – that blunt, scarred face, the pale skin and coal-black hair, as beaten-down and hammered into grimness as everything else on this damned world.

Forget it. Forget him. Remember Phaelias, who brought you here, and Crowl, who gave you sanctuary. And remember what they were after, both of them the same target, something that had cracked apart both their retinues. That remained the focus, the key to pulling something worthwhile out of the fire.

Phaelias had been correct – three High Lords had been involved in the scheme, acting in concert from the very start. One, the Speaker of the Chartist Captains, Kania Dhanda, had recanted her involvement and had withdrawn into her fortress. The second, Master of the Astronomican Leops Franck, was dead. The third, more than any other, was beyond any easy reach – Oud Oudia Raskian, the Fabricator General, as much a machine as a

man, possibly on Mars, possibly somewhere else. His domains on Terra had been infiltrated twice, a move that had killed Phaelias and had almost killed Crowl. Going back to that sprawling territory during the current anarchy was surely even more dangerous, since the domain itself had become threatened across all its borders and the skitarii had been roused into something close to a frenzy. No, she would not return to Skhallax, not while the fingers clamped on the galvanic-rifle triggers were so twitchy.

Then again, for what she had in mind, there was no need to. Her service with Phaelias had brought her into contact with the servants of the Machine-God more than once, and certain things had been learned from those encounters. One was that tech-priests of any seniority carried vast amounts of data with them, much of it pertaining to things that they had little individual control over or interest in. The Mechanicus as an institution was swimming with information-screeds and binary-bundles. Every instrument under their control was engorged with it, overspilling with duplicate and triplicate copies of numeric-sequence reports that no set of eyes, whether organic or bionic, would ever have time to read. That habit gave them certain strengths – no arm of their esoteric priesthood was ever in total ignorance of the operations of their centre, and commands could be disseminated rapidly and extensively through the various transmission webs every notable operative had access to.

But every weapon could be turned on its bearer. The wider Imperium had always been mistrustful of knowledge, fully aware of how dangerous it was when shared. Keeping so many of its adepts in a state of ignorance was a much of a firebreak as it was an article of faith – what was unknown could never be divulged to an enemy. The Priests of Mars saw things differently, a tendency that, if you knew where to look, created opportunities.

Now she was out, on the hunt again, she chose her strike-location carefully, relying on knowledge gleaned from when Phaelias had been planning his first incursion into Skhallax City. Select air-routes between the Mechanicus enclave and the far larger Sanctum Imperialis were used by certain command cadres, chosen for discretion more than speed. Those convoys weaved through a maze of run-down industrial zones, as sparsely inhabited as anywhere on Terra ever was, making use of the deep cover provided by derelict shafts and chasms before they needed to surface for the open run towards the great gates. Traffic was infrequent along such

conduits in normal times – better to use the data-grids and secure hololith channels to share messages – but Khazad knew as well as anyone else that comm-signals were currently unreliable and fragmented. Until order was restored and the main transmission spires put back in action, physical transport was the only way to be sure of getting through to an interlocutor. As military efforts geared up to clamp down on the riots and coordination between command centres was required, the tech-priests would need to risk coming out into the open to make sure that Skhallax was part of the restoration counter-surge.

Khazad had taken a flyer – a commandeered civilian U-4 Spire-runner – north from Salvator, skimming across a world of sullen fires and aimless destruction. The situation remained critical, but the revolts' fervour was ebbing now. It was hard to maintain the energy of widespread disorder on Terra for very long, unless you had discipline and imported supplies to rely on. The fragility of life on this most leveraged of worlds meant that it was easy to burn through ration stores and non-fouled cisterns, after which your fighters would be famished and parched in short order. Any disorganised insurrection would swiftly devolve into a frantic round of looting, all of which would be competing with the greater bulk of the limitless population, who would also be hoarding as much food as they could and fighting tenaciously to hold on to it. Even a psychically charged eruption such as this one had its limits – a sworn servant of the Dark Powers might be more fanatical than most, but she still needed to eat, still needed to drink, still needed to sleep occasionally and have a secure base from which to operate.

The skies were as dark as Khazad had ever seen them in daytime. The clouds were bruised and heavy. Every horizon was smudged with a bloody rim of red from the fires, all sending slender tracks of coal-black into the lowering heavens.

She kept the nondescript flyer low, risking shots from spire-level rather than take the chance of running into something more powerful higher up. A few commercia holo-hoardings were still in flickery operation here and there, flashing out incongruous propaganda from the Ministorum and the civil security bodies, even though there were no crowds on the transitways and assembly plazas to witness them. Vehicle wreckage was everywhere – burned-out groundcar chassis, smashed up atmospherics. A few lumens shone, but signs of human activity were sporadic and furtive. She did spy

one big gathering – what looked like thousands of rag-wearing wretches marching along a viaduct chanting something unintelligible – and there were a few snatched glimpses of large gangs scrabbling their way through the piles of refuse. Several enforcer towers were still burning energetically, their walls broken open and their symbols of authority shattered.

What a shambles. Someone, somewhere, needed to get a grip. Where were the Space Marines? Where were those vaunted Custodians, guardians of the Palace itself?

Nowhere close, that was for sure. If they were active anywhere, it was far away from this place.

She put the flyer down on the dust-strewn surface of an empty landing stage, jutting out a few metres from the shoulder of a manufactorum perimeter command tower. She killed its engines, clambered down from the cockpit, secured the doors. Ahead of her was another of those long, semi-derelict chasms. It ran north-east, snaking between the flanks of giant constructions. Its base was lost in smoke-filled shadow, its far side hazy. A smell of burned metal rose up from its depths. The hundreds of viaducts and arched bridges that spanned the gulf were all lightless, devoid of any movement.

Khazad slithered down, edging to the very lip of the stage. She activated the cameleo-nodes on her armour. Some of the nodes – refitted by Erunion just days ago – stuttered before cycling up, but soon she felt the faint tingle of the sensor-scattering field embed. Such tech wouldn’t do much to keep her hidden from a determined enemy who knew where to direct augurs, but it did give her a measure of obscurity.

She withdrew and unfolded twin grapple hooks and checked the power levels on the turbo-launchers before clamping one to each forearm. She shuffled down over the edge of the platform, worming deep into the nest of steel struts under the narrow rockcrete shelf and settling into a spot with a direct view of the chasm in front of her.

Then she waited. For a long time, nothing happened. No atmospherics hurtled down the metallic trench in either direction. She heard noises of combat from all around her, some far off, some uncomfortably close. The acrid smell of the smoke began to filter in through her helm’s rebreather, sticking to the inside of the mechanism. She let her muscles relax and fell into her pre-combat mental disciplines.

It was hours before anything changed. Khazad's head lifted at the first sign of turbines churning. Red lights steadily emerged, pushing through cloudbanks as heralds of a greater shadow beyond – a monstrous grav-barge, trailing metallic streamers from barrel-vaulted flanks, its foredeck arranged into two brass spheres looking like compound eyes, its underside hanging with bone-like protrusions and its spine festooned with spiked vanes. It wallowed rather than raced, leaking prodigious quantities of inky effluent. Its hull-plates were sooty and spoiled, its viewports glowing crimson in the murk. Icons of the Mechanicus had been engraved on many of its surfaces, but carelessly, as if those paltry signs were intended only for the poor wretches who still had to make use of biological eyes. Exposed cogs and pistons rotated and pumped from numerous gashes in its blast armour, making the entire vessel look like some vast brass crustacean, scuttling its morbid way through the poison clouds of Terra's low transit channels.

Khazad tensed, shifting into position for the leap. The grav-barge lurched and growled its way closer, marker-lumens strobing dully. Scanner dishes rotated to and fro across its hull, but they didn't find a purchase on her augur-slippery hide. In any case, the operators were most likely scanning for armed mobs, not individuals.

She waited until the machine had crawled just past her position, grinding an ash-clogged path about fifty metres out from her vantage. She lowered both arms in front of her, zeroed the targeting lines on an access hatch, and fired. Twin grapples spun off into the murk, thunking deep into the hull as they bit. Khazad locked them in place, activated the cable-pull and pushed off from the platform as the motors whined up to speed.

She was hurled out into the open, and for just a second was racing wildly out over the void, her legs swinging across an abyss of near-total darkness, the cables whistling as they furled. She caught sight of sheer walls dropping down and down, barely lit with pinpricks of weak yellow, before she was yanked up again and reeled up fast into the grav-barge's underbelly.

She slammed hard into the hull, tasting the smog and exhaust fumes in her rebreather as her helm bounced against the metal plates, before securing herself tightly with a mag-clasp around her waist and releasing her right arm from the grapple-launcher. Swaying along with the barge's erratic movements, she activated her powerblade and carved through the hatch

covering, severing down a join between plates before inserting a microcharge to crack the lock open.

She worked like a surgeon, deftly, quickly, silently. The hatch cover blew – not completely, just enough to allow her to get a hand to the controls. Once the heavy door was cantilevered open, she swung her legs up, attaching the first grapple-hook to the inner lip of the aperture to pull herself inside. She released the second cable, and wriggled fully into the gap. Then she was in the bilges of the craft – below the main engines, by the sound of things. The interior reeked of unguents and burnished metal, together with that dusty Martian fragrance that seemed to cling to everything they ever made. The interior was dark, bone dry and rattling, with precious little headroom and plenty of ways to get killed.

Khazad left her left-hand grapple-hook in place on the outer hull, but tidied everything else away. Then she was moving, head down, armour shimmering with its light-scatter field, hunting for the machine-spirit chamber. Such places were normally located in the heart of these craft, buried down in the innards away from harm. As she moved, she heard the clang of movement above her – skitarii and tech-priests clunking their way from deck to deck, not obviously in any kind of hurry. Her heart was beating fast now, her breathing picking up, her senses prickling. She clasped Okira, her Shoba ritual blade, in her right hand, powered down for the moment but still lethal.

The first guard she encountered was just outside the chamber itself – a Provost prowler-unit of some kind with a green-lensed helm and a short-barrel shotgun. It failed to pick her up quickly enough, its vision-enhancers confused by the cameleo-screen for just a second, which was long enough for her to sweep in close, sever the cables at its neck, plunge her blade up through its jaw and into the cranium. The Provost jerked, frothed, and then shuddered into stillness. She used its semi-fleshed claw to access the chamber’s lock-unit and open the slide door. Then she dragged it inside and sealed them both in.

All around her, pressed so close she could barely move between them, were the barge’s data-coils. Each shimmering unit was over two metres tall, encased in brass lattice cages and thrumming with static that skipped and rippled across rows of storage canisters. Knowing that she had only moments before detection, Khazad slipped out four data-slugs and inserted

them into hard-plug interfaces. She flicked the cipher-crackers that Phaelias had used and activated the shunt-down. All four slugs started to click as the screeds unfurled into their own storage systems. It only took a matter of moments, but Khazad waited impatiently, knowing that when the Provost failed to respond to the regular pulse-burst from the barge's command, more units would come looking for it.

The shunts concluded with a series of faint bleeps, and Khazad unsnapped each slug. She stowed them quickly and headed for the exit. The corridor outside was empty, and once out of the chamber, she broke into a run back to the insertion point. She got close – within a few metres of the hatch – before the klaxons broke out and the clank of boots above turned into an echoing clamour.

Khazad raced for the hatch, skidded down to the rim and kicked it open again. The first fizz of las-fire shot overhead, searing scorch marks across the iron casing. She dropped down through the aperture, swung herself out through the hull's edge and scrambled to locate the grapple-hook she'd left impaled there. From above, metallic pinions and claws scraped and scuttled rapidly towards her position. She locked the grapple-launcher to her armour, stowed her blade and kicked out into the void below. The cable reeled out at maximum speed, throwing sparks from the feeder-unit and sending her shooting away into the chasm below. As she dropped from the barge's underside, she aimed her second launcher at the speed-blurred face of the nearest building.

She fired just as las-bolts sprayed down at her, a few coming very close to punching straight into her wildly swaying body. Then the second grapple punched home, pulled taut and yanked her savagely towards the nearside cliff face. Khazad cut the link to the barge-hull, her downward plummet arrested by the rapid tug sideways towards the flanks of a big hab-spire.

She looked up to see four Skystalker airborne infantry tumble from the now-distant grav-barge, each of them wheeling down towards her position on spindly wings as they unfurled flechette carbines.

'Damn,' she spat, just as her grapple-cable reeled in and she smacked into contact with the hard rockcrete of the spire's outer wall. Working hurriedly, she pivoted off her tether, rolled across to the sill of the nearest window and smashed the cheap plex-glass. As soon as she'd unlocked her grapple-hook and tumbled through the gap, the entire wall around her exploded in a riot

of solid-round fire. Some of the shells hit her armour's back, shattering the cameleo field, punching into mesh-plate and sending her flying off balance into the chamber beyond.

She hit the deck, tasting blood in her mouth as her helm rattled around her head. The chamber she'd been blasted into was unlit, abandoned, full of broken domestic furniture and scraped-clean ration packs. She scrabbled on all fours across the floor even as more projectiles pinged and zipped through the open window. The Skystalkers were swooping in fast now – they would be through the window in moments.

Khazad reached the chamber's far side, barged through the door and lurched unsteadily back up to her feet, breaking into a run for the hab-unit's exit. More huge crashes boomed out from behind her – far louder than she'd have expected from the carbines used by the skitarii she'd seen, which didn't bode well. She shouldered through the hab's cracked outer door and stumbled into a twisting internal corridor that smelled of human waste and had no working lumens. She veered left, then right, racing now, trusting to speed and luck to find a way out before the vengeful Mechanicus units caught up with her.

She managed to break out into a long vertical shaft, a huge metal stairway coiled around the hive's central ventilation duct, before they reached her. A Skystalker must have swooped down from above to cut her off, racing down the hidden duct before breaking out through an internal wall and on to the stairway just above her. Only one of them, thankfully, but that might well still be enough – it smashed through the plasteel barely five metres ahead with its carbine trained straight at her. She caught a blurred glimpse of a bizarre goggled helm, jangling rebreather cables, reverse-jointed legs and furled glider-wings, and knew she would be hit before she even got close to blade range.

But then it exploded – blown clean apart, limbs clattering against the chipped walls amid a hail of plasma discharge and the stink of charred flesh. Khazad was thrown heavily back down the stairwell by the shockwave, bouncing from the steps like a rag doll before crunching to a stop at the next floor-stage down. She twisted around, groggy from the impact but snapping her blade into a defensive position, trying to work out what had happened and where that charge had come from and how she was going to fight whatever came at her next.

More heavy objects slammed to the deck around her. Some were pieces of the Skystalker, the heavy adamantium struts still clung to by scraps of withered human flesh, but others were bodies – real bodies, living bodies, wearing armour very much like that worn by Revus. They carried hellguns, night-sights, blind grenades, the works. Khazad briefly entertained the thought of tearing into them too, trying to take down as many as she could before she succumbed, but more swiftly arrived, until forty of them were standing or kneeling around her, tracer-lines aimed at her head.

They clearly weren't skitarii. And they clearly weren't here to kill her, at least not straight away. Breathing heavily, regaining her focus, Khazad lowered her blade.

As she did so, two of the storm troopers moved aside to reveal another figure, one wearing far finer armour than they did – a deep lacquered blue, chased with silver. Its owner carried a long-barrelled pistol that looked every bit as fine as Crowl's Sanguine. He removed his helm to reveal a fine-boned, deeply tanned face. He looked painfully young, though perhaps that was at least partly artificial. His rosette was a synapse-scorpion set within a circle of iron.

'Niir Khazad,' the man said. His voice was smooth, polished, utterly assured. 'My compliments – that was some work you did out there.'

Khazad kept her sword's power field lit. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'A fellow traveller,' said Latan Zijes. 'With an offer to make.'

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CHAPTER FIVE

It had been a long night. Once she had started to examine the images, one had led to another, then another, until she had been held a virtual prisoner by them. Just as the skull had told her, many sequences were corrupted. More were missing than should have been the case from simple canister erosion – Gorgias had been damaged badly more than once, smashing his oculus, his augur equipment or his powercells.

Still. A life had been traced out by this servo-unit, in fragments and blurred snatches, in bursts of hololiths and audex lines. Even after the long sessions had ended and Spinoza had gone back to her cell to recover, she couldn't get them out of her head. Events had moved fast for her since her arrival on Terra – a whirl of activity that had plunged her into action without time to gather thoughts or marshal resources, and so only slowly was she discovering the deeper roots of this place, the careful accumulation Crowl had laboured at for his citadel, bringing lost souls into a secret sanctuary where they could do their work. And slowly, very slowly, the price had been exacted for that, weighing down on him, eroding his youth and energy and replacing it with coldness.

And for all that background colour, for all the inconsequential data she

amassed from the recordings, she gained nothing in the way of clues to his current whereabouts. Just as Erunion had warned, from the moment this affair had begun, all Gorgias showed her were things she already knew by acquaintance or through testimony. She had even witnessed scenes where she herself had been present, seeing herself through Gorgias' fisheye lens.

'Throne, I was sullen,' she breathed to herself. 'Like a schola brat fresh from discipline. How did he tolerate it?'

Sleep remained elusive throughout the small hours, and even the catechisms failed to give her much peace of mind. The citadel's thick walls muffled much of the world outside, but not all of it – every so often a dull boom would ring out, or a scream that caught the wind.

She must have dropped off in the hour or so before dawn, for the chime from Aneela woke her from a fitful doze. She opened heavy lids to see grey light filtering into her chamber, creeping across the time-worn stone like sluggish water.

Spinoza dragged herself from her cot, straightened out her robes, smoothed down her stiff thatch of hair. She didn't spend more time in front of the mirror than she had to, since all she saw was the now-obvious physical deterioration. Terra had got under her skin properly, eroding her, folding her up in its deadening embrace, just as it had done to Crowl.

She walked down to the librarium. When she arrived, Aneela was waiting for her, surrounded by data-tubes and picter lenses. A couple of stiff-limbed old servitors limped around in the shadows, arranging bundles of files in crates by the weak light of wall-mounted candles.

'Tell me something helpful,' Spinoza said, sitting down opposite her.

Aneela ran a weary hand across her forehead. 'Yulia would have done this better. She'd have known where to look. We don't have the–'

'I know. Just tell me what you found.'

Aneela reached for a data-slate. All around her were rolls of parchment and other objects from Jarrod's private chambers. 'Nothing conclusive. There was one item of interest – a xenos artefact, some kind of bone. A message had been hidden in it, now taken.'

'By him?'

'I'd guess – left for him to pick up.'

'So Jarrod set him on his path.'

'Likely. As to what that path was, well…' Aneela sighed, and scrolled

through the runes on her slate. ‘Nothing concrete. The mirror you brought in was just that – a mirror. Though there were a few of them, all broken. The best we have is the book you found. Most of it was mundane, but there were those runes – the ones of proscribed origin. Handwritten.’

‘Which we can’t translate.’

‘With Yulia gone–’ Aneela bit her lip. ‘No, we can’t.’

Both of them knew one place where the answers might exist – the many Ordo Xenos archives, all deep within the Inquisitorial fortresses buried inside the Sanctum. Those places were guarded so heavily that you needed high-level clearance even to get within fifty kilometres of them. It would have taken weeks at the best of times to actually enter the archives, something that would have attracted too much attention from those whose job it was to keep an eye on what was being studied on Terra and by whom. During the current anarchy, Spinoza guessed the facilities were all closed, part of the lockdown of the Sanctum that Arx had ordered.

She sat back in her chair. Throne, it felt like her whole body was rotting. ‘This is Terra. Trillions somehow spend their lives here. Someone must know this stuff.’ She was silent for a moment, deep in thought. ‘Jarrod was a xenos specialist,’ she said finally. ‘Were there any others on the contact list?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘Not the detail, maybe, but you took him places. You picked things up.’

Aneela shook her head. ‘Jarrod was the only one from that ordo.’

‘Maybe not in the ordos. Other sources, less regular.’

‘Traders?’

‘Traders. Just like Naaman Vinal. Think. Maybe from years ago.’

Aneela’s brow wrinkled. ‘Crowl did have a contact, out beyond Malliax. An old starfarer, long retired. Came back to Holy Terra to see out her final years, I think.’

Spinoza snorted. ‘Any world she wanted, and she chose this one?’ Aneela looked confused at that, and Spinoza cursed herself – for Aneela, this was *her* world, one that every priest in every sermon had told her was the most blessed of them all. ‘Ignore that. She had a full warrant? When did they last meet?’

‘I don’t know. Months ago. Maybe more than a year. In connection with a different case, and she might not be there still. Might not even be alive.’

‘But you have a loc-ref for her spire.’

‘I can find it.’

‘Then it’s something to check, isn’t it?’ Spinoza got up. ‘Organise it. We’ll leave within the hour.’ She made to leave, already thinking of the things that would need to be put in place before she did so – then stopped. ‘You have… a daughter.’

Aneela looked up at her, surprised. ‘I do.’

‘Is she safe?’

‘She is, yes. Attempting to maintain her studies.’

Spinoza nodded, a little clumsily. This really didn’t come easily. ‘I reviewed some footage. He took care, it seems, to ask after this kind of thing. I had never noticed that before. Nevertheless, a commendable trait.’ She drew in a deep breath. ‘So, then, I am glad of that. I shall attempt to follow her progress. When all this is over, we must see about entry to a good schola. Assuming there are any left.’ She smiled weakly. ‘Which I’m sure there will be. This being the site of divine government. Throne be praised.’

Aneela smiled back at her – real, unfeigned pleasure. ‘Thank you, lord,’ she said. ‘It will mean a great deal to her that you asked. And to me. I mean, we have trouble getting her to learn the rites at the best of times. Knowing that you take an interest… Thank you.’

Spinoza felt her cheeks flush. ‘Within the hour, then,’ she said, turning away hurriedly. ‘Ensure you are armed.’

The elevators were all broken, their carriage-units smashed at the bottom of the chain-haul shafts. That made moving up the levels of the hab-tower laborious, and after twenty or so floors had passed, Revus began to feel the sharp burn in his thighs.

He’d been on the move for a long time by then. Making any kind of progress through the warren of internal passages and external transitways was arduous, particularly as he’d needed to fight off loose mobs of gangers and looters more than once on the way up. Those mobs would have paused before, seeing his storm trooper gear and insignia. Now they didn’t. Hungry, maybe, or perhaps just deranged. The charge on his weapon was lower than he’d like as a result – it had been used plenty.

He reached a wider access corridor running from the tower’s core to its

perimeter, and edged down it carefully. The lumens were intermittent, exposing piles of abandoned belongings littered along the stained floor. Two bodies lay halfway down, buzzing lazily with flies. Just beyond the corpses was a standard chameleon-screen from some branch of the Ministorum, still powered up and cycling images from propaganda departmentos. The unit's plex-glass lens was smashed, making the pictures fractured and juddering – all Revus could make out was a pair of smiling faces, jerking back and forth across endlessly looped frames.

The doorways he passed by were all broken open, no life signs anywhere. At the end of the corridor was one narrow external window, heavily barred. Revus drew up to it, wiped the greasy armaglass pane, fixed a remote auspex to the surface and connected his helm's input feed to it.

It took a moment to orient himself as the auspex's view swept across the towers, spires and Ecclesiarchy piles immediately outside. He fixed on the preordained coordinates, got his lock, and trained the viewfinder on a glut of interconnected transitways about eighty metres down. After a moment or two, an enforcer convoy trundled across the nearest of them, klaxons blaring from armoured personnel carriers. A little later came what looked like a collection of looted groundcars and wagons, driven fast and erratically. Then a long pause, a hiss of hot winds, before he sighted the vehicle he was after.

A single groundcar this time, driven far more slowly. It had exactly the same profile and armour style as the one he had taken to get out here.

Revus watched the groundcar draw up to the entrance-maw of the tower opposite, slow to a halt, then crack its gull-wing doors up. A figure got out, dressed in armour very much like his. The driver looked around carefully, then moved cautiously up towards the tower's main access chamber. It looked like he was trying to enter the combinations on the first of many locked doorways.

Revus angled his viewfield upwards, sweeping past row after row of blackened windows, until he was staring straight up into the cloud cover. He reset the image filters, compensating for static interference, and began to probe for heat signatures.

Nothing emerged immediately. Revus modified the scan, shifting away from the tower's edge and out into the centre of the narrow void between buildings. That was when he got it – just a fleeting glimpse, nothing solid.

They were being careful still – keeping high, using the smog as a screen. No doubt they had better sensor equipment than he did, something capable of piercing the shadows at range. Still, the one glimpse he'd obtained should have been enough. He ensured the pict-image was stored, then got back up, walked the way he had come and headed down the stairwells. As he did so, the figure down at ground level finished doing whatever he had been doing at the entrance-maw, got back into the car, and drove off.

The two of them rendezvoused an hour later.

By that point they were deep underground, in a barrel-roofed hall that echoed with every movement they made. It was almost completely dark, and Revus turned his helm-lumens on as he entered the eastern end of the hall. Each sweep of his head picked out rust-mottled metal surfaces, rivets coated with grime, pocked panels. The floor was ankle-deep in oily water.

His groundcar was waiting for him at the far end, parked carefully between a pair of criss-cross support struts. The driver had removed his helm, and stood casually next to the slowly cooling engine.

'Got what you wanted?' he asked, tossing Revus the groundcar's lock-slug.

'Enough,' said Revus, catching it. He reached into a capsule at his breastplate and withdrew a credit-slice. 'What we agreed, Salax. Plus a little something extra for your trouble. If you've damaged the vehicle, though–'

'It's just as you left it. Trust me.' The man called Salax took the credit-slice, checked the amount of coin stored on it, and nodded. 'Not as useful as it was, given, well, you know.'

'You'll survive.' Revus looked the groundcar over. After the visual checks, he ran a discreet sweep for listening devices. Salax was about as trustworthy as the rest of his contacts in the run-down Salvator undercrofts, so you had to be sure.

'You're not going to tell me who's after you?' Salax asked.

'I don't know who's after me.' Revus completed his inspection, and unlocked the doors.

Salax grinned. 'I could get used to this, though. Mimicking a captain of storm troopers. Next time you're out here, be careful – I might have recruited a whole squad.'

Revus got in. 'Wouldn't recommend it.' He started the engine, and the

doors slid closed. ‘They’d eat you alive.’

Then he was revving through the brackish water, kicking up a spray as he rumbled up the exit ramp, leaving Salax to find his own way out of the maze. He headed up towards nominal ground level, sweeping along the curving nexus of viaducts and suspended transitways, past the smouldering ruins of a water-treatment facility before powering through a rubble-scattered parade ground, replete with ouslite effigies of obscure Imperial generals and heroes.

Revus waited until he was halfway back into home territory before pulling over again. He reached for the auspex unit, pulled up the stored picter image from the spire, adjusted the filter controls, and took a careful look.

The auspex had picked out the flank of a military atmospheric, half-screened by smog, but with enough exposed to reveal an outline – something agile, not massive. Revus knew all the marques, and this was a Stiletta-class observation craft, unmarked and lightly weaponed. Many Militarum regiments used them, alongside the Arbites and some well-equipped enforcer precincts. He scanned up to the intersection of the right-side wing and the engine housing and got what he was after – a regimental ident printed onto the hull, together with a tiny insignia engraved in gold.

‘Palatine Sentinels,’ he murmured.

He sat back in his seat, thinking that through. That regiment was based at the Palace itself, one of a select band of Astra Militarum detachments entrusted with guarding the core estates of the Sanctum Imperialis. No regiments permanently based on Terra were slouches, but these were among the most capable regular troops in the entire Imperium. Given all else that was going on, given the huge demands placed on such precious resources, the fact they were tailing him was… interesting.

He could opt to go back to Courvain now, limiting the damage and alerting Spinoza to the interest from outside. That might be the prudent course. Then again, he had discovered little else so far, and nothing of substance that truly justified the risk in coming out here. Better to return with something to contribute, even if it only closed down certain avenues of enquiry. Gulagh had given him something to go on, even if it was only slender, and that couldn’t be left hanging.

Revus pushed the auspex equipment back into its casing, and restarted the groundcar’s engine.

One more call to make. He’d just have to be careful.

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CHAPTER SIX

Once the shock had faded, you began to forget what the world had been like before the cataclysm. You forgot just how teeming every narrow space had been, how bursting with life, how cramped and noisy and garish and vivid. Where had all the people gone? Many had died, that was certain, but most had not. They were mostly there, somewhere, buried down deep and keeping their starving faces out of view. The effect was extraordinary, as if the entire planet had shrivelled up into a hidden shell, withdrawing its infinite tentacles into a tight and tiny curl, waiting for some change in the waters that would see it all emerge into the grey sunlight again. In the meantime, every visible horizon was moribund, sweltering under a pall of terror, consuming itself in a ground-out orgy of half-hidden violence that would erupt just as you began to think the fires had died out.

Spinoza had received a few more broken communications from the Representative's adepts at the Sanctum. None of the comms-bursts had reached her fully intact, but the spirit of the orders was nonetheless clear: return to the core, reinforce the walls of the Palace until armies could be mustered to reimpose the vice of control on the urban sectors. By refusing to respond to that injunction, she was skirting with insurrection herself.

Except that, as an interrogator, no one had control over her save her master, and no one had control over him save the Emperor. The Representative could bring some moral force to bear, but not much more than that. The great and the powerful were all locked up behind their mighty parapets now, husbanding their strength for the long promised attempt at restoration, almost completely blind to what was taking place across the vast city-realm beyond.

So she plotted her own path. The Spiderwidow crawled through turgid skies, its engines still operating far below peak performance. Aneela piloted it, while storm trooper Sergeant Tallis and four of his squad sat in the hold. That was as much of an escort as Spinoza dared to bring with her – with both Revus and Khazad out on operations, Hegain and the remainder of the troops would have their work cut out keeping Courvain's portals from being kicked in.

Still, you had to be mindful of certain formalities. Rogue traders, in her experience, were status-obsessed people. Perhaps because they operated so far from regular Imperial lines of command, whenever they were welcomed back into the fold they were sensitive to the point of paranoia about being given the respect they felt they deserved. Most of their breed, of course, never made it to retirement – their occupation was as dangerous as any in the Imperium. For those few who did survive into old age, and for whom the rejuvenat no longer answered and the attractions of eternal voyaging had begun to pall, the choices for their twilight years were near endless. Most end-of-life traders were fantastically wealthy. The prestige of having such an exotic character coming to reside on any given planet was enough to make the average governor salivate – Spinoza had even heard tell of bidding wars, with rival worlds striving to outdo one another in blandishments and incentives. After all, who knew what rare tech a trader might bring with them? Who knew what tales they could tell of the measureless void that so few humans ever truly explored? And who could ignore the prospect, once the sad end inevitably came, of getting hold of some of that immense stash of coin for the planetary coffers?

Which made coming back to Terra, of all places, an odd choice for a trader to make. It was not known for its paradise zones or pleasure sectors. Its poor inhabitants were too filthy and stunted to be of any interest to an explorer, while its rich ones were unlikely to have their heads turned by

even the most prestigious rogue trader.

So this Ferve Clodia, this old contact of Crowl's that Aneela had unearthed, must have been a strange one. Further digging in what remained of Courvain's archives revealed that she was a scion of one of the greater trader lines, bearing a Warrant of Trade dating back so far that its return to the Throneworld had caused waves even amid the serially unimpressible elite at the Palace. How Crowl had ever come across her, and why she had chosen to make her final home in the otherwise nondescript urban zone of Ayavasta-
Majoris, very far from the centres of power and prestige, was a total mystery.

For all that, Spinoza had to admit that the woman had created a formidable place for herself. As the Spiderwidow pushed its way through the rolling banks of smog, Ferve's private mansion emerged in stages, its sloping walls jostling for prominence with the close-packed spires and towers around it. Its topmost sections had been plated in what looked like beaten gold, with the ramparts carved into ranks of statues and mythic imagery, some of it traditional Imperial, some of it very strange indeed. Giant effigies of starships surmounted some of the towers, floodlit from below, making the whole place resemble some strangely shrunken and frozen space port. Spinoza's practised eye could detect the faint visual interference of active void shields over the steep rooflines, which was absurdly impressive for a single citizen's residence, however successful they might have been in their active career.

'Place looks intact,' Spinoza said, as the gaudy pile of eclectic styles swam closer.

'From memory, she brought plenty of her crew back with her,' said Aneela, guiding the vessel towards a slowly opening hangar door. 'Capable of looking after themselves, I'd say.'

The gunship was shepherded in, and Aneela set it down within a gloomy receiving hangar. Tallis' squad disembarked with Spinoza. They were greeted on the apron by a suitably eclectic mix of figures: three servitors with flare-barrelled guns in place of right arms; a diminutive abhuman with long white hair; a slender man in the pale dress uniform of a fleet purser; five armsmen in a variety of armour types; some kind of skinny, bald adept in purple robes and a visor over his eyes; a canid with an augmetic rear leg,

and a pair of pearl-studded servo-skulls hovering warily overhead.

The abhuman made the sign of the aquila. ‘Be welcome,’ he said to Spinoza. ‘Master-at-Arms Eckart Silisa, in your service. I trust by His name that your passage was in good order?’

Spinoza returned the gesture. ‘As much as is possible in these times. And you are preserved here, I hope?’

‘By her powers,’ Silisa said, turning to usher them further inside. ‘As you’ll see for yourself.’

A long walk followed. The mansion was large, and the entire party tramped up a series of steadily more ornate staircases. It was consistently gloomy wherever they went, with shrouded lumens floating high overhead, half-lost in clouds of dust motes. The floors, the sills, all the surfaces, were dusty and flyblown, despite their evident age and worth. Fine marble floors were cracked, real-fabric rugs and throws were mouldering and insect-attacked. Where the illusion gave out entirely, glimpses of a rougher substructure became visible – ribbed mouldings, beams, struts and supports. The whole edifice creaked softly as they passed through it, ticking over like cooling metal, underpinned with a constant thrum of generatoria in action.

‘Like a voidship,’ whispered Tallis, as they walked.

‘Very,’ agreed Spinoza.

Silisa eventually showed them into a large chamber high up on the mansion’s western face. Groups of orderlies shuffled about the murk, some armoured and heavily augmented, some looking little more refined than the gangers who were terrorising the hab-spires outside. The large windows all had their blinds pulled down, and suspensors threw a weak light over piles of furniture and other ephemera – wooden chests, brass instruments, heavy-cast deck weaponry, Navigator House honours, cartographic arrays, command bridge pulpits – all stacked and arranged chaotically around more prosaic collections of tables heaped with dusty decanters and glasses, occasional chairs of various Imperial vintages and armaglass-fronted cabinets stuffed with items Spinoza had no terms for. The place, for all its surface disorder, carried a quiet hum of regular activity, with dozens of bodies moving between the towering piles of parchment bundles and picter lenses and lasgun racks, all travelling as if following long-engrained habits.

At the very centre of the chamber was a raised circular platform constructed of some kind of dark polished wood, perhaps twenty metres

across, on which a collection of similarly ramshackle furniture had been arranged. The summit of it all was a plush high-backed armchair decked out, rather ambitiously, in the manner of a ship's command throne, with faded damask covers over the arms and clawed feet. A woman sat in it.

'Captain,' said Spinoza, climbing up the steps and bowing as she approached. 'I thank you for receiving me.'

Rogue trader Ferve Clodia was tiny. Not an abhuman like her master-at-arms, but withered nonetheless by extreme age. She wore a long velvet dress that sat loosely around a stick-like frame, and had a gold-rimmed augmetic over one eye. Her head was bare and shining, though the baldness was partly concealed by a turban of fine fabric with lace edging. Her features were sunken and wrinkled, but her one natural eye still shone with a fierce, dark intensity.

'For as long as any of us can receive anyone,' Clodia croaked, waving to the collection of chairs. Members of her crew sank into the most comfortable looking of them, leaving Spinoza to select the one directly facing the rogue trader. Tallis and his troop remained standing at the dais' edge, looking incongruous in their sheer black armour amid such decayed finery. 'What a bloody farce, eh? When I woke up this morning, I told the boy in my bed that it's been amusing for a while but it was about bloody time someone got off their starched arse now and sorted this out. You agree, eh? Long past time a grip was taken, but they're all perverts and degenerates up at the Sanctum so we'll just have to weather this foulness while they soil themselves in private and try to decide whether to slip some acherosa into their fine wine or actually grasp this by the generative organs and make some damned decisions.' She laughed throatily. 'I send my boys out into the hives from time to time and teach the scum to fear the Holy Aquila, and it's all tremendous fun, but it can't go on forever. Makes me half wish I'd never made planetfall and just ran myself into dust up in the big black, but you can't escape this world forever, not if you've got any piss left in your bladder, because it's the best one of the lot. That's why you're here, eh? With that old husk Crowl? Why we're all here, Throne preserve us – all the sad pilgrims and the hustlers and merchant-princes – you have to be *here*.'

Spinoza swallowed. 'Very… much so.'

'So then, how's Erasmus? Still as dry as a commissar's tear duct? He's a

good boy, your master – knows his stuff, knows his way around a ship like a proper low-deck-rat, I like him – but *Throne* has someone left something rigid up his arse and forgotten to come back to get it.' The man in the purser's uniform chuckled quietly. 'I thought when I first met him that he actually didn't like it down here, that he'd be off and up into the black himself, running after that woman he had stowed up at the Palace – never knew her name – but it gets to people after a while, this place, and we said, didn't we, Albujar, that he'd be here longer than we would, and then he'd be burying us alongside the old Warrant and having the last laugh, despite that he looks like he's about to cough up his final spit at any moment.' Then her face suddenly looked alarmed. 'But that's not it, is it? He's not taken the Emperor's Last Coin, has he? Tell me not. Because – don't listen to a word of this bloody nonsense – I like him more than most men and dislike him less than most inquisitors, and he never tried to ruin me, sleep with me or kill me, which is more than can be said for most people on this planet.'

'He is missing.'

'Ah. Well, that is a damned pity, because I have a little casket of something with his name on it, if it hasn't rotted away in the cellar already, and I'd like to see him drink it here with me before my third heart bursts in my sleep and I go off to the bosom of the Emperor to plead for my sins and my virtues. So that's why you're here, then? I'd bet Silisa you'd come to commandeer our guns for the effort, and we'd have to send you back with a few slaps to remember us by, so now I owe him a fine meal and the boys don't have to get unpleasant with you, which is all to the good.' Clodia sat forward in the chair. 'What's this all about, then, girl? Where's he gone?'

Spinoza placed her gauntlets together in her lap. 'We were working on a case. One involving xenos. Lord Crowl paid a visit to a colleague, a man named Slek Nor Jarrod, who was an expert in such matters. After undertaking further investigations, I believe Crowl returned to confer with Jarrod again on the same subject. When we attempted to retrace Crowl's steps, we found Jarrod's habitation ransacked and abandoned. Jarrod himself is likely dead.'

'And how could you know that?'

'I do not for certain. But I believe he was hunted by a powerful individual, one who nearly destroyed us in turn, so it is a reasonable judgement.'

'So then, Crowl could be dead too.'

‘He could, though I hope earnestly he is not – my guess is that he visited the hab after Jarrod was attacked. Whatever the case, I need to find out where he went next, and what Jarrod told him.’

‘Because of these xenos matters you were investigating?’

‘Just so.’

Clodia barked out a hoarse laugh. ‘Emperor’s balls, you’re even more starched than he was! They make your kind like that, I suppose – knock the juice out of you at these scholas and punish any random spurt of vim until you’re all machine-copies of those doom-and-death’s-head priests we have to pretend to be scared of.’ She shook her head. ‘But you’re a good girl to look out for him like this. I like loyalty – you’d fit into a crew all right, once we’d knocked the edges off you. And now, look, I think I see what your problem is. This is xenos work. But Erasmus isn’t a xenos person, is he? Hells, from what I remember, he couldn’t even stand to talk about them, like it was some kind of stain to admit to having them on the crew-rolls at all.’ She shook her head sadly. ‘A weakness in him. In all of you, who never get far enough out there to see the Beacon start to flicker and the void open its jaws at you. We could learn from them – some of them – if we let ourselves. Might get a bit wiser, if we did, eh? Not so keen on all this stupidity and burning anything with an extra eye or a spiny leg, eh?’

Spinoza felt Tallis’ trigger finger twitch every time this woman called her *girl*, which was almost endearing of him. For her part, she found the torrent of words wearying rather than amusing, a transparent attempt to belittle that cut no ice. In the old days, under Tur’s tutelage, she might have pushed back, demanded that some respect be shown. Her short service with Crowl, though, had already softened that impulse – it didn’t matter that much how a thing was done, as long as you got what you wanted.

‘So,’ Spinoza said, ‘do you still have xenos on your rolls?’

Clodia snorted. ‘Throne, no! You think we’d even get them here in one piece? You think, if we’d tried that, that we wouldn’t have had fanatics like Jarrod sniffing around our door within five minutes, itching to burn us all alive in here while they warmed their skinny hands at the flames?’ She rolled her eyes. ‘No, I’m not that stupid, not even in my dotage.’

‘But you had them in your service, at one time?’

‘Might have done. Might not have done. You will draw whatever conclusion you wish to. How, precisely, does this bear on what you’re

telling me?’

Spinoza drew the book out from her armour, the one she’d taken from the hab, opened it at the pages where Jarrod had scrawled his runes, and handed it to Clodia. ‘This is all we have. We cannot interpret it. The situation means that we cannot make use of the usual channels to help us.’

Clodia took the book, had a look at the pages, and shrugged. ‘Jarrod wrote this?’

‘We assume so.’

Clodia tossed the book over to the man wearing the purple robes. He caught it deftly, adjusted his visor, and started to read.

‘What do you make of that, Albujar?’

A few moments passed while the adept worked. Eventually, he looked up. ‘These are aeldari symbols,’ he said, in the kind of thin, scratchy voice that all Imperial scribes seemed to affect. ‘Some I can interpret, some will require work. I have materials in my chambers that will assist me.’

‘Albujar was our liaison,’ Clodia said. ‘If we had ever had xenos on our crew, he would have been the one to work with them. Learn their language, their habits, their likes and dislikes, just so the ship didn’t descend into anarchy because we couldn’t serve up a non-lethal meal or keep the temperature survivable. If we had ever had such wretches among us, that is.’

‘How long will it take?’ Spinoza asked the man.

Albujar frowned. ‘I don’t know. They’re difficult things. I swear that they mean different things every time you look at them.’

‘Time is of the essence,’ said Spinoza.

‘And we are all busy people, interrogator,’ Clodia interjected. ‘We have things to be getting on with ourselves, and Albujar is a man with many duties. What I’m thinking, now – forgive me, trading is in my blood, after all – is this… What can you possibly offer us, to make it worth our while?’

Spinoza smiled dryly. ‘I am a servant of the Emperor Himself,’ she said, softly but firmly. ‘I have the right under law and precedent to compel your assistance. And yet, you and I can both see that the world is ending around us. You and I both know that I do not have the force to compel you, nor the coin to tempt you. It would insult everyone in this room to pretend otherwise.’ She turned her hands over, palms up, as if to show she had no weapons in them. ‘I am appealing to your sense of duty, captain. I am

trusting that your return to this world indicates a certain sense of loyalty to the Imperium and its customary practices. I am assuming that you are astute enough to know that I would only come here if my investigation were of the highest importance – more important than the life of a single man, to be sure. Maybe I am wrong about you. But I do not think I am.'

Clodia smiled – a shrewd little snatch of dry lips. 'Pretty words, girl,' she said. 'And so I'll assume some things of my own. I'll assume that you've been observing every possible weakness of my fortress since the moment you entered it. I'll assume that you've already got several plans in mind to crack it open. And I'll assume that, Crowl's absence aside, your current weakness is strictly temporary, and that when things are back to normal, you'll be back here with a whole fleet of atmospherics and enough ammunition to send my little kingdom sinking into the underhive. Because that's how you people operate, isn't it? I think you'd hold a grudge about this for a long time, and the grudges of the Inquisition are really quite legendary. How does that sound, as an assessment?'

Spinoza's gaze never so much as flickered. 'You will draw whatever conclusion you wish to,' she said.

'Ha!' Clodia laughed. 'See, I like you very much! Even stiffer than the old man, but you've got some heart and stomach, I'll give you that, and you talk like a real one. An inquisitor, I mean. A real-life, foul-as-vomit, tough-as-Titans inquisitor.'

Clodia looked over at Albujar, and gave him the nod.

'Work on it,' she told him. 'As soon as you have a text, send it to the girl. I have a feeling she'll know just what to do with it.'

Khazad was taken swiftly from the spire. Zijes' forces were numerous and well armed, and they had arrived in a whole squadron of Nighthawks. Unlike her own gunship, these were all in decent condition and looked fully combat-ready. Zijes went with her in the lead craft, swooping low and fast over the smouldering cityscape until the flotilla reached what seemed to be its base of operations – a collection of low buildings sunk among a deserted set of cooling towers that had once served an urban sector power plant.

She was taken inside. Soon she found herself in a low-lit room surrounded by Zijes and four of the storm troopers, brought there by a circuitous route she would have struggled to remember.

Zijes had said nothing to her during the flight. Only when she was seated in one of two metal chairs and he was sitting opposite her did it begin.

‘Well, then,’ he said. ‘Niir Khazad. Late of the retinue of Inquisitor Phaelias, now in Inquisitor Crowl’s company. That’s right?’

Khazad looked back at him. He was slim, young, in very good condition and with a trained fighter’s poise. His skin was a healthy brown, indicating either recent arrival on Terra or expensive treatment. He sat with his spine straight, hands resting in his lap. The confidence he projected was unfeigned – he was fully convinced of his own capability. Maybe he was right to be, or maybe this was just another brash scion of the Imperial hierarchy, possessed of a few parchment qualifications and believing himself equal to the primarchs. Time would tell.

‘That is my name,’ she replied.

‘Try to relax, assassin,’ Zijes said. ‘You’re among friends here. I hope you can forgive the way we met – the city’s dangerous at the moment.’ He smirked to himself. ‘Martians aren’t the easiest souls to negotiate with in a fast-moving situation. We had to get rid of a number of them on the way in, just to be sure of reaching you, which will not go down well with the tin-heads. Still, we’re out in the wilds again now, aren’t we? Just the way I like it. And you too, I’m guessing.’

Khazad said nothing. She met Zijes’ gaze evenly, waiting for something worth her while to reply to.

‘So, to the point,’ said Zijes. ‘Your name is known at the core. We’re aware, now, of the trouble you ran into just before all this current madness. We understand the work your old master did – a bit – as well as the services you offered Crowl after that. Arx wants to repair the damage. She needs allies. Consider this an opportunity.’

‘For what?’

‘Advancement. Placement with a retinue of importance. Tasks worthy of your abilities.’

‘I have tasks.’

‘Sure you do. But, once they’re all done, you might want to think how best you might continue to serve the Throne. Maybe as master of your own retinue. Maybe in service to a true lord of the ordos. One who has the resources to make a real difference, here or elsewhere.’

Khazad sighed. ‘You think me stupid. Do not start with your price – start

with what you want.’

‘Hells, it’s not about me,’ said Zijes. ‘I want coin and power, like any sane man, but Arx has her own priorities. She wants things working again, the anarchy to end, and for that to happen we need to know what took place at the Fortress. She needs to speak to those who were there.’

‘You are doing so.’

‘You’re one of them. Your master was another.’

‘He is missing.’

‘So I hear. But the interrogator – Luce Spinoza – her name’s at the top of my list. She was in command, wasn’t she, during the raid? She made the decisions, she made the calls. Her voice was on an audex screed given to me by Sergeant Haessler of the Imperial Fists. She may very well be a Hero of the Imperium when all this settles down. So her version of events should be heard.’

‘Then speak to her yourself.’

Zijes smiled. ‘Yes, I could try that. I could try to negotiate that prickly citadel you all inhabit. It would be difficult. It might end badly – nerves are frayed at the moment. So, all things considered, I could use an introduction.’

Khazad smiled wearily in turn, and shook her head. ‘She would not listen to me. She does not listen to anyone.’

‘I heard you had a… falling out.’

Her smile disappeared. ‘Then find her yourself.’

Zijes sighed, and activated the projection field on his rosette. The holo-seal of the scorpion spun out into the air between them, replete with sigils of authentication. ‘Like I said, we’re on the same side. Same ordo, same holy mission. My superiors are serious about this. They need answers, and they’re used to getting them. One way or another, they will get her to the Sanctum. We can let them do that work on their own terms, with whatever collateral damage comes along with it, or we can do it sensibly, between ourselves.’

‘She won’t come,’ Khazad said.

‘Because of Crowl?’ asked Zijes. ‘I can understand that. I can admire it. I might feel the same in her position. Maybe she feels guilty for what happened, because she wasn’t there with him, like you were. That’s right, isn’t it? They weren’t together, in the Fortress? But you were. And you

could keep up the search for him, if you were minded to. With help. With help from my people, who have plenty of gadgets and guns at their disposal.' He leaned forward. 'But she needs to come in with me now. Quietly, no fuss. That's what's needed, that's what's important. Afterwards, everything's up for grabs. You get what you need to find your inquisitor. Change the game, inject some urgency. Because she's been slow. Slow to act. I know that's not your style.' His gaze was steady and unyielding, the kind of gaze that had no doubt been perfected in the interrogation chambers of a dozen worlds. 'She won't be harmed. You have my word on that. It's not a trial. Think of it as a consultation. A sharing of information. But it must happen soon.'

Khazad looked back at him. She looked at the troopers around them both. They were, as Zijes had said, in good shape. Better than the battered remnants still commanded by Revus, at any rate.

'She won't come,' Khazad said again.

'An introduction,' Zijes said. 'Nothing more.'

'And… no harm to her.'

'On the soul of the Blessed Angel of the Gate, no.'

Khazad's eyes never left his.

'It's your choice, freely made,' said Zijes. 'But I'll need an answer.'

Khazad finally looked away, down at her lap. She remembered then what Spinoza had told her at their last meeting. *No oaths bind you to us. Do as you will.*

Her eyes snapped up again.

'Then I have one,' she said.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Morgant-9 voidport was not a large or distinguished place. Far greater transit hubs sat just a few hundred kilometres to the north and east, and the truly massive stations, the ones capable of bringing down heavy landers packed with supplies or pilgrims, were further away still. This place was just one of the many thousands of low-grade entry points, capable of berthing system-runners and shuttles, some of the smaller Navy tenders and maintenance vessels, but nothing much more impressive. Even before the anarchy it had been ramshackle, starved of resources and left to moulder. Its large rockcrete landing stages, stacked up on top of one another in the familiar Imperial manner, were cracked and dented. Its control towers were blackened from centuries of constant engine-wash, and its personnel-processing stations were gloomy, dust-blown halls with weak lighting and leaking drains.

It might easily have been overrun entirely, or abandoned, or perhaps still besieged by crowds of desperate citizens. By the time Revus approached it, none of those things appeared to have happened. The high perimeter walls were damaged in many places, with marks of widespread burning up against the rockcrete panels, but the defence towers were still in operation,

with their slit-windows illuminated and their lascannon banks gently rotating.

Only when he got closer did evidence of recent fighting become evident. He'd stowed his groundcar some distance off, making a show of heading south towards Salvator before finding somewhere quiet to secure it in the hope of leading his tail off in the wrong direction. Then he'd crept carefully through the underground ways, avoiding trouble where it flared up, pressing himself up against the flaking walls of service tunnels and sewer-lines to stay hidden. He finally emerged close to the voidport's old bustling approaches, and almost immediately the stench of decaying bodies hit him. The corpses were piled up in the overhung streets around him, some long into putrefaction, some looking fresh-slain. Vehicle-wrecks studded the plazas immediately ahead of the main entrance, many of them seemingly driven straight into the reinforced gates before they had been destroyed.

Nothing moved. Tendrils of thin smoke gusted over the carcasses and charred metal before sinking into the bloodstained gutters. The only obvious sound was the clunk and ratchet of the rotating guns some fifty metres off.

Revus crouched down in the shadows and activated a secure line to the voidport's command tower. He'd visited this place twice in the past on business for Crowl, the most recent time being just a few months ago, and had, as a matter of course, retained the direct access codes in his armour's comm-system. He'd already made contact with the facility's administrator and arranged the rendezvous; now it was just a matter of getting inside.

'Port-master,' Revus voxed softly. 'I am within sight of the Terminal Nine entrance gates. Are you ready?'

'Standing by,' came a crackling voice over the link.

Revus reached for his hellpistol and checked the charge. Not ideal. He took a final look around, then shuffled ahead through the rubble and corpse heaps, keeping his body low and using the cover of the burned-out vehicles where he could. As he neared the gates, something stirred a few metres to his left, and he snapped the pistol around.

He found himself staring into the face of a woman, less than ten metres away. She was clearly famished, her skin pulled tight over the bone and her dirty clothes hanging off her as she knelt. She stared at him, eyes wide, shivering despite the heat. She carried no weapon. Signs of some blood-

sickness spidered across her exposed flesh. She barely looked capable of walking.

‘You’re going in… there,’ she croaked.

Revus scanned the area beyond her – no other movements registered. ‘Remain where you are,’ he told her.

‘You’re going in there. Take me with you.’

Revus started to move again. ‘Remain where you are,’ he said again.

She came after him, scrabbling on all fours, her breath an urgent rattle. ‘Take me with you.’

He turned back, pointing the pistol directly at her. ‘Go back.’

The woman halted, staring down the barrel. Her rheumy eyes flicked back up to his. Then she started to move again, deliberately, making no attempt to hide her approach.

‘Go back,’ Revus said again, though his heart was already sinking. Why would she? As her desperate mind had clearly worked out, either he’d relent and take her, or he’d give her a better death than anything she was likely to get in the hab-towers. She was forcing this. And he couldn’t blame her.

He shot her cleanly through the heart – a single las-bolt, enough to send her frail body thudding back into the dust in a weak spray of blood. She didn’t move after that. Revus crouched down again for a little while, checking that no others had heard the disturbance and come investigating, but the voidport’s approach sank back into stillness, broken only by the crackle of distant flames and the *tick-clunk* of the defence towers sweeping around.

It got to you, after a while. How quickly things had fallen apart. How weak it all had proved.

He moved off again, picking his way through the wreckage. Only when he reached the torn-down flaywire just outside the gates themselves did the blast-panels lift and the slide doors within crack open a little. He saw armed guards on the far side, all clustered watchfully around the opening. He slipped inside, and almost immediately the screens started to lower again.

There were six of them, four in uniforms of the Malliax subsector perimeter guards, two in enforcers’ suppression plate. The lead figure – a slim woman with a bandaged right leg – made the aquila. Her jerkin carried the name *Sergeant Kallo*.

‘Just you?’ Kallo asked, in a tone of voice that gave away a quiet hope that

he might just be the vanguard of a relief force.

‘Just me,’ said Revus, holstering his hellpistol. ‘How long have they been trying to get in?’

The officer motioned for him to follow her. ‘Every night. For sixteen days.’

Ahead of them were the open receiving areas, divided up into crowd-management silos, now all empty. Beyond those was the first tier of administrative buildings, and beyond those were the landing stages themselves, rearing up into the drear sky like slabs of spoiled meat, all of them empty of the ships that would normally be sitting in docking cages or being lifted up to the blast-rigs. The entire complex was ringed with high walls and studded with comms towers and defence stations, though it all looked sparsely manned and on the edge of decrepitude. The soldiers who walked alongside him were exhausted. Still, those trying to overrun the place were no doubt worse off, which was something.

‘You have relief incoming?’ Revus asked, feeling like he already knew the answer.

Kallo laughed hollowly. ‘If you’re not it, then no. Who knows, though? Maybe in a week. Or two. We say our prayers.’

They reached the doors of an elevator column, and the troops left to return to their patrols. Revus and Kallo took a clattering cage up a number of levels. As it hauled along, she leaned heavily against the inner metal wall.

‘Any idea what this is, yet?’ she asked idly.

He didn’t, not truly. None of them did, save for Crowl, maybe, who at least had spoken to the Traitor High Lord, but even he had said nothing in the short time he’d still been with them. The anarchy hadn’t even dignified itself with a definite cause – it had just *happened*, as if reality had suddenly had enough of how things had been going and had decided to shift to a new and ruinous course.

‘It’ll come to an end,’ he said. ‘Sooner or later.’

‘Sooner, I can live with,’ said Kallo, as they reached their destination and the doors jerked open with a shriek of corroded metal runners. ‘Later might be a problem.’

They emerged into the observation deck for the terminal’s control tower. In normal times, it would have accommodated a few dozen menials, maybe a servitor or two. Long rows of scanner stations ran in parallel to a set of

thick armaglass panes looking north out over the landing stages. All the stations were dormant, and there was only one figure waiting at the edge of the chamber, a nervous-looking man with an adept's robes.

'Thank you, Kallo,' the man said, gesturing to Revus to join him. 'I'll summon you when we're done.'

The sergeant bowed and headed back to the elevator cage, limping a little. Revus walked up to the administrator.

'You've had a hard time, Erjab,' he said.

'No worse than anyone else,' the man replied. His face, Terran grey, looked unhealthily flushed and sweaty, and his fingernails were scabbed where he'd gnawed at them. 'Is this about our relief?'

Revus gazed out through the windows. The sheer emptiness of the stages outside was surreal. 'I won't keep you long – just some questions.'

Erjab snorted a weak laugh. 'That almost comforts me, you know that? The Inquisition – you're still doing your thing. I was always terrified of you before.'

Revus smiled thinly. 'Why was that, administrator?'

Erjab swallowed. 'Just, well… you know. Anyway.'

'I've been told the void-routes are down. Tell me about that.'

'You heard right.' Erjab gestured to the desolation of his once overcrowded voidport. 'A few days after it happened. The blindness. Orders from sector command, the last we got before the comms blew. We knew it was coming – they were all trying to get out, clawing at each other for a ship, and at the end of it we were shooting them at the filter-gates to stop the gantries from collapsing. And they knew – understand this – they *knew* there was a problem with the Beacon, and that if they made it to a void-going ship then they'd be in for a world of hurt, but they kept coming, because of what they'd seen in the habs. So they had to stop it, somehow, and eventually we got the command to shut everything down, seal the place off. We couldn't stop the last of the ships going – didn't have the guns for that – but Throne knows what happened to them after they lifted. Maybe they got out, somehow. Or got intercepted. I don't know.'

Erjab spoke quickly, the words tumbling out over one another. His eyes were too bright. Stimms, perhaps. Or perhaps just a fever and nerves.

'I was told there are destruction protocols,' said Revus.

'That's right. That's right. Not in orbit, though. Not as far as I know. I'd

guess they don’t have the ships for that, so there’s a glut of void-hulls just sitting there, so many they’d have a hard time judging what to knock out. Last I heard, they were guarding the Mandeville zones, the runs out to them. Stopping what they can from getting into the warp – or coming out of it. That’s what they’re worried about. Something getting out, something getting in.’ Erjab fiddled with the collar of his robes. ‘They talk the talk, when we get anything through from the core, but they don’t know a thing. That’s what I think. They don’t know what caused this. They don’t know what’ll fix it. Is it an invasion? An insurrection? They’re just chasing their tails, being seen to do something, waiting for a miracle to happen.’

‘So when did the order come down?’ asked Revus. ‘How many days, exactly, from the start of it all?’

Erjab thought on that. ‘Two,’ he said. ‘Or maybe three. No longer than that. Yes, three. I remember thinking that I’d close the gates myself if they didn’t order me to. I didn’t like shooting them. They were only trying to get away, most of them at least, not anything worse.’

‘And after that third day, after the last lifters were away, nothing has come through this voidport?’

‘Nothing.’

‘And others? Any you’ve been in contact with?’

Erjab shrugged. ‘It was a blanket command, maximum priority. None of them will be moving anything, even the big centres. They wouldn’t dare. It’d be instant termination, if it got out, and my guess is they’re watching it all carefully. You’ve seen the skies, captain. There’s nothing in them – no atmospherics, no landers. Total shutdown, save for the Navy, and they’re run ragged trying to put the fires out.’

Three days after the effect had hit. Crowl had still been at Courvain then, recovering.

‘But if I wished, however foolishly, to leave the planet,’ Revus tried, ‘would there be a way?’

Erjab exhaled. ‘This is Terra. You have the coin, you have the ships, there’s always a way. But I’d not want to try it, not unless I was desperate. Where would you go? Try to get close to the realspace horizon, and you’d have Navy cruisers gunning for you. I mean, you could try to run that gauntlet. There are some good captains. But we’re talking line battleships – serious assets, all on total war footing, treating anything moving up to the

Sol System escape-plane as part of a potential Black Crusade. No, I'd not try it. Not even to get out of here.' His red-rimmed eyes darted up to Revus'. 'Not that I'd want to. I have my duty, of course. We all do. Unto death.'

'Indulge me. If I were mad. How could it be done?'

'You *would* be mad.' He frowned, rubbed his forehead. 'You'd need to find something to get you up into orbit. Nothing civilian – they're all gone, got out already or shot down or wrecked. Nothing military, obviously. The only thing left, if there's anything at all, is the short-range cargo mules – the kind of thing you'd take up to an orbital conveyer. They tell me there's some under guard up at the Adria yards, though nothing's certain.' He puffed his cheeks out. 'Then you're in trouble. You'd have to dock with something bigger, somehow persuade the crew to push out beyond the cordon. They wouldn't do it, so you'd have to force them. And if you did that, somehow, you'd barely scrape the system edge before a large chunk of Battlefleet Solar would be using you for ranged target practice.' He looked up at Revus again, suddenly worried. 'You really think someone's tried this?'

'I'll need all the data you can give me. Any movements you're aware of, from here or elsewhere.'

'It's yours. It'll be done. But I don't see…' His look of apprehension didn't fade. 'If you could tell me a bit more. Maybe a name?'

'He wouldn't use his own. Just the data will do.'

Erjab nodded. 'I'll get you everything I can.' Then he rubbed his hands together, the fingers trembling a little. 'I don't know how these things work. But if you could… put in a word. Maybe. I mean, it's been a long time, and we're running very low now.'

No, Erjab didn't know how things worked. No one at all would see Morgant-9 as a priority. It was already far better off than most surviving institutions, given that its occupants still had some food and ammunition and the walls were intact. Things were likely to get far worse before they got better, even if some kind of restoration were already in progress, because they were a long way from the bright centre and the damage had been very great, and so the chances of the place surviving were not high, however things unfolded from here.

'I'll see what I can do,' said Revus flatly. 'Now, if you please – that data.'

The call came in just as Aneela began to wheel away south-west, still more than two hundred kilometres from Courvain. No audex managed to make it over the compromised comm-nets, but some sigils scrolled onto the Nighthawk's cockpit console, all in the retinue's house cipher.

Spinoza, sitting beside her, took a look, then raised an eyebrow. She applied the cipher key, and decoded the message.

'From Khazad,' she said.

Aneela kept her eyes away from the decoded message as it scrolled across the lens.

Once she had read it, Spinoza cleared the display. 'She's in the Leorxes Cluster, subdistrict nine. Her ship's down. She's calling for assistance.'

Now it was Aneela's turn to look surprised. 'Injured?'

'Apparently not. She has material from a Mechanicus transport, intact, but had to bail once they locked on to her Nighthawk. She's gone to ground – I have her loc-ref.'

Aneela flew on for a few moments, waiting for an order. 'So…' she ventured, after none came. 'Are we–'

'How long will it take us to get there?'

Aneela glanced down at the console's scrolling cartograph. 'Forty minutes, current speed.'

'Fuel?'

'Adequate.'

'Take us.' Spinoza switched her comm-channel to Tallis, down in the gunship's crew chamber. 'Sergeant, we are making a diversion. Prepare your squad.'

Aneela calculated the trajectory and the gunship swung onto its new course, punching through the clouds and coughing out smog-bursts from the labouring engines as they keyed up to full speed.

Spinoza drummed her fingers on the console. She hadn't expected to hear anything from Khazad so soon. Part of her had never expected to hear from her again. This was the assassin who'd survived on her own for weeks after Phaelias' death, one who was so proud of her independence and judgement that she'd virtually set out as a sole operative already, and who had made her feelings about Spinoza herself perfectly clear at their last meeting.

So, what was this? A genuine issue, one that Khazad couldn't solve? The city was more than usually perilous at the moment, so that was possible. Or

was it an oblique way of moving towards some kind of resolution? If she had unearthed something important, something that pinpointed Crowl's location, she might require urgent extraction before her position was uncovered and the information was lost.

And the message couldn't be ignored, of course. She ran it through the console again. It had suffered badly on the transmission, just like every comm-burst did in Terra's mess of atmospheric interference. The date-stamp was hours out of alignment, and the final section was appended with a long trail of gibberish. It was definitely from Khazad, though. The intelligible portions conveyed all her terse sense of entitlement – somehow she even managed to infuse a blank rune-run with resentment. A talent, that.

The gunship flew on, low and fast, weaving through the blackened and sullen mass of buildings. As they neared Khazad's reported position, Spinoza restored the seal on her armour's gorget and reached for her helm. The air looked more poisonous than usual – a swirl of purple-grey between two mighty shoulders of adamantium. Iron-bound industrial chimneys spiked up into the murk, their sides prickling with lines of marker-lumens. A thicket of pipework covered the distant ground, writhing over itself like a covering of serpents, lit up every so often by the flash of gas-flares. The viaducts between tower flanks were a maze of scaffolds and metalwork cages, and the chasms below rumbled dimly with the working of hidden furnaces.

'Those forges are active,' Spinoza observed.

'Praise the Throne,' said Aneela, angling between two clusters of cooling towers. 'Restoration is coming.'

The gunship dropped down into the deep cover of a sheer well of iron and plasteel, before locking on to a narrow shelf protruding from blank screens of tortured piping. The atmosphere around them fizzed with electrostatic, and arcs of lightning crackled further down into the gloom. For all the surface activity, however, the immediate surroundings looked deserted – no menials, no servitors, no fighters.

'Do you have her yet?' Spinoza asked, snapping a fresh power pack into her pistol.

'Affirmative,' Aneela replied, checking the augur readings as she swivelled the gunship over the landing shelf. 'Fifty metres in, this level.'

'Alone?'

‘Unable to confirm. Atmospheric interference worsening.’

The Nighthawk touched down, and its doors clunked open. Spinoza leapt down from the cockpit, joined on the platform by Tallis and his squad. The air tasted acrid and hot, the way ahead lit by gas-flare blooms and scampering static-bursts.

Spinoza didn’t need to give them any orders – the troopers automatically fell in around her, hellguns held taut. Together, they jogged from the landing site and inside the huge construction, penetrating deep inside its warrens of cobwebbed tunnels. The noise of machinery became louder, echoing up from deep vaults below. A claustrophobic three-dimensional landscape of corroded metal and heavy rockcrete plates pressed in close, tight labyrinths of ironwork encasing larger halls stuffed with grimy workings. This was a power plant – the outer reaches of one, anyway – and in at least partial operation. Perhaps Aneela was right – if someone had got this working, then others might swiftly follow. For all that, the chambers they ran through were still empty of living occupants, so the active operatives must have been a long way down, cloistered somewhere among those gargantuan reactor cores and energy converters, working furiously to keep everything running as it should, heavily guarded and fuelled by their fear.

When the squad finally located Khazad, she was alone, apparently unharmed, standing inside a windowless, high-ceilinged chamber under a single strobing sodium lumen, her armour intact and her weapon sheathed.

‘Assassin,’ said Spinoza, looking about her warily. The space was dark and cluttered, piled with refuse, machine parts, supply crates. ‘The gunship is waiting.’

But Khazad didn’t move. There was something in her expression that Spinoza had never seen before.

‘I stay here,’ Khazad said. ‘And so do you.’

From all around them, figures suddenly emerged from the shadows – storm troopers, a dozen of them, encircling Spinoza and her squad. Tallis’ troops automatically dropped into defensive crouches and picked targets, but they were entirely exposed and the numbers were impossible.

‘Hold your fire,’ Spinoza told them, her eyes never leaving Khazad. ‘What is this?’

The assassin didn’t answer. Then another figure emerged from behind her,

clad in armour the equal of Spinoza's own, and with the unmistakable swagger that only members of the ordos really ever perfected. Like all of them, his face was hidden behind a closed helm. He unveiled his rosette, just in case she hadn't already realised what this was.

'A necessary imposition, interrogator,' the man said. 'Everyone stays sensible, and no one gets so much as a scratch.'

Spinoza trained her laspistol on him, more for form's sake than anything else. If she attempted to fire, she knew that more than a dozen more powerful guns were aimed directly at her, operated by warriors who wouldn't hesitate and didn't miss. 'Explain yourself,' she said, maintaining what she could of her poise. 'And quickly – I have little time for games.'

'Latan Zijes, Ordo Hereticus,' said Zijes. 'Your presence, Luce Spinoza, is required at the Sanctum. You'll be taken from here and placed in the custody of the Representative. The Beacon remains inactive, the facts of its collapse yet to be understood, and you are a person of interest to that enquiry.'

'I do not comply. My work here cannot be halted.'

'It wasn't a request. I don't really want to disable you by force – waste of effort – but believe me I'm quite capable of it.'

'An inquest on the Astronomican's troubles can wait. This cannot.'

'Your assassin explained your current mission. It's only you we want – the others of your retinue are free to do whatever they wish. When your examination is complete, assuming Arx says so, you'll be free to get on with it. For that matter, Arx would no doubt like to speak to Erasmus Crowl too, when and if he reappears, so we all have an interest in bringing this to a satisfactory conclusion.'

'If that is so, then let me continue my work here – you will not find him without us.'

'Denied. You're coming with me.'

'Fool. You are interfering with something more dangerous than you know.'

'Then you can explain that to Arx.'

Spinoza found herself tensing up from pure frustration. Being taken to the Sanctum under armed guard would derail everything. It might take weeks or even months before an appointment was granted, given the slow grind of operations at the core. Maybe this exercise was truly about uncovering the truth, as Zijes suggested, but just as likely it was a way to get her out of

commission, to smother embarrassment and eliminate any witnesses to the disaster at the Fortress. It was entirely possible, given how these things worked, that she would never come back at all.

‘There is no *time* for this,’ she hissed, working hard to keep her anger in check.

‘Then hurry up and comply.’

Spinoza looked over at Khazad. ‘I never would have believed it,’ she said, her voice daggered with accusation. ‘Not of you, even now. Nothing you wish to say to me?’

‘Only this,’ said Khazad. ‘Ekko-nine.’

The instant the code word passed her lips, a brace of metallic objects clunked to the deck around her. A microsecond later, the chamber erupted into a blaze of searing light and sound. The battle-cant warning was just enough for Spinoza, Tallis and his squad to activate their helms’ dampeners, but Zijes’ warriors were hit with its full force. That wasn’t enough to disable them – their visors had been down and their reactions were near instantaneous – but blind grenades set off at such range, without any warning, were still enough to momentarily scramble an unprepared helm-display. The ceiling panels blew next, and more storm troopers rappelled down from the gaps, firing exclusively into Zijes’ forces. Right out of the heart of it came Gorgias, swooping like a vulture and screaming at the top of his vox-emitter.

‘*Infernis!*’ he shrieked, spraying needles. ‘*Imbecilicus-majoris!* Death-death-death-death!’

‘Take him alive!’ roared Spinoza, shooting at the inquisitor as he coiled and leapt through the whirl of las-light and leaping shadow.

Hegain dropped beside her, emptying las-bolts into the nearest storm trooper. Around them, more than twenty of his troops entered the fray, all bearing the mark of Courvain’s garrison. Khazad had pounced into action the instant the grenades had detonated, darting in her familiar balletic style through the maelstrom of bolts and flashes, but so had Zijes, moving with startling speed and agility. Spinoza went after him, taking a hit on her breastplate but firing back immediately, trying to clip him but only hitting one of his protectors. The inquisitor seemed to have some kind of interference field in operation, scattering the already wild-edged muzzle flares and making it impossible to get a shot. He somehow slithered and

shifted his way clean through the whole scrum of bodies, made the exit and staggered through it in a whirl of sparks and light-splinters.

Leaving Tallis and the garrison troops to deal with his escort, Spinoza, Hegain and Khazad went after him, bursting through the narrow doorway and racing back the way they had come. Gorgias swerved out in their wake, then streaked ahead, his lens a furious sun yellow. Hegain got an impeded shot away, nearly bringing Zijes down as he hurtled around a corner, but that was the last attempt. They all rounded the tight bend, skidded to a halt, with Gorgias clanging erratically off an overhead pipe, and then there was nothing – just an empty corridor ahead, the thrum and boom of the machines from below, and a faint tang of ozone.

'Teleporter?' Hegain asked, scanning for a shot.

'Negativa,' said the skull, groggily spinning back into focus, his sensors clicking wildly. Spinoza realised he hadn't hit the wall – he'd been hit by a projectile of some kind, and it had messed up his gyros.

'Agreed,' said Spinoza, bringing up her own auspex-filters. The four of them spread out, moving down the narrow walkway until they reached a dislodged panel in the wall. Spinoza kicked it clear, aiming her pistol into the gap, and saw a mess of torn-up cabling and internal struts underneath. Something had burrowed through it all, burning as it went. 'Resourceful, this one,' she murmured, trying to penetrate deeper, and getting a mess of static back from the auspex. She looked up. 'He had more troops with him?' she asked Khazad.

'Many more,' the assassin replied. 'Not here – I persuaded him they will be detected – but not far off.'

Spinoza drew in a long breath. The place was a maze, a cavernous world of poorly lit chambers and shafts. Running him down would be time consuming, and if he had powerful backup – as Khazad said – their short-term numerical superiority would be swiftly reversed.

She took one more look down the tunnel he'd carved, fighting the urge to plunge down it herself in pursuit.

'Damn it,' she breathed eventually, and pulled away from the brink. She opened a channel to Tallis. 'Status, sergeant.'

'Chamber secure,' came the response over the vox. *'Hostiles neutralised. Suspect backup called in, but no signals yet.'*

She looked over at Khazad, full of questions but alive to the danger.

‘Explanations can wait,’ she said. ‘For now, we get out.’

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Two storm troopers were dead – one from Tallis' squad, one from Hegain's – and three more had been badly wounded. The survivors had taken the bodies up into the Nighthawks, as well as the corpses of Zijes' slain troops for examination. That made things crowded and unpleasant in the crew-holds, loading the gunships heavily and making the internal airspaces wretched. Spinoza had been unwilling to get into things with Khazad on the way back, so stowed her away with Tallis, while she took the controls of another gunship alongside Hegain. Aneela, Gorgias and the others were distributed among the remaining aircraft, and they set off in convoy back to Courvain.

'How long were you waiting there?' she asked Hegain once they were clear of the power plants and back out into the overcast skies of the city-sector beyond.

'Three hours, more or less than,' Hegain said, looking slightly uncomfortable to be asked.

Three hours. The transmission from Khazad had only come in just under an hour ago.

'So she planned this with you, then?'

‘We received the call from her, yes,’ said Hegain, indicating with every pore of his being that he’d rather Spinoza asked Khazad about this directly. ‘We assumed – we *hoped* – there had been coordination. It is hard, all in all, at the present time, to be very sure of anything.’

‘There hadn’t. But I’ll speak to her.’ She turned from the flight controls to give him a terse smile. ‘Glad you were there, sergeant.’

Hegain nodded. ‘Another retinue after us. Again. In all this… mess.’ He looked a little disgusted. ‘It is a bad business. We could do without it.’

‘That we could. We have ever been thus, though, eh? Deprived of an enemy in plain sight before us, and we turn on our own. Something in the blood, maybe.’

‘Aye. Maybe you have the right of that.’

Spinoza adjusted the forward scopes, trying to compensate for the muck slamming against the forward viewers. ‘How stands Courvain?’

‘Perimeter intact, all gates secure. At least, when we left, that was the case. I will be glad to be back in all swiftness, though, if I am to be honest. It does not take a great deal for the cracks to open, if you take my meaning.’

‘I do,’ said Spinoza, adding a little power to the engines to risk a faster passage. ‘Very much.’

After that they flew on without saying much. Spinoza had to concentrate to handle the constant turbulence, as well as ensure that the rest of the convoy remained in visual range – if they became scattered in this smog, there was every chance the instruments would fail to keep them close enough for an effective defensive formation. Part of her expected to see sensor blips at any moment, closing fast, driven onward by a vengeful inquisitor fuelled as much by embarrassment as duty, and they needed to be ready.

Who in the hells was Zijes, anyway? She’d never heard the name, though that in itself was not so unusual, given her length of service here. More worrying was the implication he was working for Arx. Spinoza had assumed, perhaps naively, that every sinew at the Sanctum would be bent on restoring the lost Beacon, securing ground, taking the fight to the mass of uncoordinated looters just in case this was, as so many feared it was, the precursor to a proper invasion from a serious enemy. She had thought that because, deep down, she still wanted things to be as she had always believed them to be: competent, efficient, dedicated eternally to the eternal glory of the Imperium. Yet again, though, Crowl’s jaded vision had proved

closer to the mark – even now, *now*, with every conceivable system failing, the great and the powerful were still scrambling to cover their backs, to snuff out inconvenient truths, to jockey and jostle for position. The very idea of it gave her a sour taste in her mouth – as if something she had eaten her whole life had turned out to be rotten only after it had infiltrated every part of her body, wedding her irreparably to the wider corruption, reeling her in and making her just one more part of the sickness.

Hegain was right – they could do without this.

In the event, they made it back to Courvain without further incident. The battered gunships entered the lone active hangar in sequence, greeted by the skeleton guard detail Hegain had left behind. Spinoza took in the relevant details from the shift commander – Revus was not back yet, three minor incursions had been repulsed, monitoring of the Salvator sector showed another ebb in the frequency and ferocity of the riots. She and Hegain orchestrated the deployment of the wounded to Erunion's care, and the redeployment to guard duty of those capable of it. As the two of them marched down the corridors towards the citadel's command chambers, Gorgias swooped jerkily between them, as if his centre of balance had been knocked out of kilter.

'Are you functioning adequately?' Spinoza asked him.

'Perfecto,' the skull replied, in defiance of appearance. 'All *exacta* fine-fine.'

Presumably, he was still recording all of this. She wondered how usable such vid-feeds would ever be. 'Report to Erunion before next shutdown period,' she told him. 'I wish you to be optimal before you are required again.'

Gorgias mumbled something unintelligible, swerved at the last moment to avoid crashing into a lowered angel's-head finial ahead, then bleeped what was probably a grudging acceptance.

Hegain took his leave, hurrying off to attend to his many duties. Spinoza was detained with her own after that – a procession of urgent reports to sign off, crises to deal with, situation analyses to glance at before stowing for later. She pushed it all aside as swiftly as she could, in favour of the business that had to be addressed.

Free at last, she made her way to Khazad's chambers. She could have put a guard on them, if she'd been inclined, but had decided not to. By the time

she arrived, the assassin looked just as she had done the last time they had spoken in Courvain – armour off, drenched in sweat, in the middle of physical exercises that seemed designed to mortify the flesh as much as improve her already impeccable prowess.

'Assassin,' said Spinoza, closing the door behind her and folding her arms.

Khazad stood before her, panting. 'Interrogator,' she said.

'From the beginning.'

Khazad nodded. 'I am intercepted east of Skhallax. Just after I take data from Mechanicus transport. Too many to fight. He offers me a place at core, change of retinue, only if I get you to him. Promises not to harm you. He was aware that…' She looked for the words. 'There has been difference of judgement. I believe I cannot break free at that time. I decide to discover more. See if he can be drawn in.'

Spinoza listened. 'You sent a transmission to Hegain?'

'Not at that point. Could not do so safely. We arrange meeting point, arrange what to do, and I only get one chance – one comm-burst. Nothing else. Was watched all the time. So I send, but I can make one change that they do not detect – incorrect routing data. I enforce delay in delivery to your node. Four hours, lost in loop. They do not notice. Courvain gets it too, but without delay, so they are alerted before you. Have time to prepare.'

Spinoza remembered the scrambled timestamp on her transmission. 'Clever. But how did Hegain know to lie in wait, not to pull you straight out?'

'Because I add Shoba battle-signals, something Zijes does not understand – he interprets as more routing data. Standard instruction for situation – *silent, encircle, wait for command*.'

Again, Spinoza had seen that – the mess of random-looking signals appended to the main message – and had given it no thought. 'You couldn't know that would be picked up by us.'

'Crowl knew Shoba. I took risk. Skull, maybe chirurgeon, knows too. Maybe even you as well, though I doubt it. Gorgias, it was. He tells me almost missed. But worth taking it, no? It worked.'

'Pretty well.' Spinoza thought on it all. 'Elaborate, though, wasn't it?'

'I wanted him to talk. For you to speak to him. So we know as much as we can.' She shrugged. 'Dangerous, maybe. But he trusts me, I think. I made

him think I am ready to leave.’

Spinoza looked at her carefully. ‘You made me think that too,’ she said.

‘I say again – where to go?’ Khazad curled a lip in a dismissive gesture. ‘I see the alternatives, the choices. This place, maybe, not so bad.’

Spinoza tried not to smile. It was grudging, it was graceless. But she’d said it. ‘So he had information on us.’

‘The audex of your call to the Imperial Fists. Testimony from survivors in the Fortress. Some recovered vid-feeds.’

‘Not very much.’

‘Enough to make guesses about… how we worked.’

‘Or didn’t.’ She unfolded her arms. Every stance she fell into at the moment seemed to be belligerent – something else to work on. ‘He will come back for more.’

‘I think so.’

‘Then we had better prepare. But the Mechanicus material? You kept hold of that?’

‘It is with Erunion now. They work to crack.’

‘I will speak to him about it.’ She made ready to turn back, to get to the many dozen things that needed her attention. ‘Good work. I am grateful – we almost took him. I hope it leads to more.’

Khazad nodded, a little awkwardly. ‘I get back to exercise, now.’

‘Please do. You will be needed again soon.’

Six hours later, Revus returned. On arrival at Courvain, he secured the data canisters he’d taken, reviewed reports from the garrison, did his best to clean the filth from his skin and clothing, then went to find Spinoza.

She was up in Crowl’s old rooms, sitting at the conference table, her head in her hands as she pored over a data-slate. The candles flickered around her, pooling reflections on the polished wood. Shadows lurked in every alcove, behind every worn statue and piece of arcana. You could imagine the inquisitor suddenly slipping out of the darkness at any moment, his withered flesh emerging into the wavering light, ready with one of those quiet, dry commands. The place was just as he’d left it, save for the mirrors. All of them, six or so, some of them very old and valuable, had been smashed before he’d left. That had been the only damage. Revus had asked Spinoza about it at the time, but she hadn’t been able to venture a reason

why. Maybe Crowl hadn't liked what he saw when he'd looked in them.

'Lord,' he said, making the aquila.

Spinoza looked up, beckoned him to sit opposite her. 'Welcome back, captain.'

'Hegain says you had some trouble,' Revus said, taking his usual place.

'An inquisitor.' Spinoza shut the slate's power, placed her hands together on the tabletop. 'Tried to be too clever – getting to Khazad, to get to me. Would have been better, I think, for him just to take the direct route – he outguns us all pretty handily.'

'Who doesn't? Why did he think Khazad would help him?'

'He had information from inside the Fortress – vid-feeds, she thinks. He must have known we were not together at the end, maybe even why. And he wasn't wrong, was he? So he could be a problem – reckless, maybe, but he's aggressive, with force at his disposal.' She spread her hands wide, in a gesture that indicated *what can you do?* 'I take it, from your expression, that you had no better luck.'

Revus forced his muscles to relax, one by one. It was getting harder to come down from that low-level tenseness he maintained during operations. Age was a part of it – he was less malleable than he had been, like a hard-worn piece of synth-leather that now cracked where it used to flex. 'No sign of him. Not in Salvator, not beyond. I shouldn't be surprised – he was always careful.' Wrists, forearms, upper arms, shoulders. 'I looked into off-world.'

Spinoza nodded. 'He has to try that, at some stage. I mean, we know what Franck told him – the last elements of the conspiracy have already left. It has to be away from Terra. Whatever, wherever this thing is.'

'But that would be difficult, even for him. Not getting into orbit, maybe, but further out. I made my own enquiries, and everything my contacts are saying checks out.' Neck, jawline, brow. 'There's an iron vice clamped over the realspace barrier. They're shooting before asking questions, just knocking tonnage clean out of the void.'

'He could break that.'

'Possibly.' When he had been in optimal condition, probably. Even a year ago, maybe. Right now, starved of Erunion's potions and with everything that had got at him since the xenos incursion, almost certainly not.

'So we can't find him down here,' said Spinoza, smiling wryly. 'And he

can’t have got out. The last dregs of the Project are already in motion, a long way off, even while the world they seek to save burns to ash anyway.’

‘But you have something.’

‘A few scraps, here and there. Some material from Jarrod that we’re getting worked on. A book. Another broken mirror.’

‘Another one.’

‘Probably just smashed in all the upheaval – I took it, just in case. More promisingly, data-coils from a Mechanicus transport, stolen by our recalcitrant assassin. There’s so much material in those things that we’re struggling to know where to start. Erunion’s people are all over it.’

‘If they answer…’

‘Then we’ll have something, even if small, to work on.’

‘And if not…’

‘Then we’ll have hard decisions to make.’ She sighed, and flexed her bruised fingers. ‘I am still committed to this, captain. Finding him. Seeing it out.’

Revus nodded. ‘I know.’

‘But only as long as it can be justified. And for as long as I can stave off this damned interest from my own kind.’

‘There’s something else.’ Thighs, calves, ankles. His stomach remained painfully clenched. ‘I was tailed, too. Not sure for how long, but they got a good look at me. I managed to shake them off a while back, but I’m guessing they know where I’m based well enough.’

‘Just a shadow?’

Revus nodded. ‘To see who I was talking to, maybe. To gauge how serious we are. Maybe just get a sense of what we’ve got left. I got a pict of their craft – it’s Militarum, one of the Sanctum regiments.’

‘They didn’t make a move on you?’

‘No.’

‘They didn’t realise they’d been seen?’

‘Don’t think so.’

Spinoza let out a long breath. ‘Militarum. You’d think they had better things to do.’ She shook her head. ‘What’s your judgement?’

‘Could be connected to your inquisitor, but I doubt it – he clearly has plenty of toys of his own. Arx might have set two dogs running on us, but that feels wrong, too. Worst case? We have another High Lord taking an

interest.’

‘Or a general. Or a sector governor. Or a hundred others.’

‘If someone’s authorised this, then we can assume they’ll move soon. They don’t have the luxury of assigning troops at the moment unless they’re serious about it.’

‘Quite. Still, it all helps to reinforce a decision Zijes had already pushed me towards.’ Spinoza sat up straighter, looking directly at him. ‘It’s me they want. Either to cover up what happened at the Fortress, or to get to Crowl, or to stop me getting to Crowl, or to kill our interest in the Project. But I won’t have this place attacked again. We need to leave. Make a show of it, draw them away and stay ahead. Start moving, keep moving.’

‘Then we’ll need somewhere to go.’

‘That’s what everything is aimed at. Hegain is already prepping the Spider-widow.’

‘Not alone, surely?’

Spinoza smiled. ‘I’m not as mad as Crowl. You’ll be coming. As will Khazad, you’ll be pleased to hear.’

Revus felt a twinge of pain at the base of his spine. ‘That will improve our defensive capability.’

Spinoza laughed. ‘It will. For now, take a rest period. That is an order. We’ll convene again soon.’ She turned the data-slate back on. ‘The work goes on. The first sniff of anything we can use, and we are out of here.’

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CHAPTER NINE

Erunion tried to stand up straight, to pull away from the parchment-heaped desktop, and felt a ripple of pain in his hunched spine. He hadn't had a proper rest period for – how long? Two weeks? More? That would kill him, in the end. He'd end up like the old man, riddled with agony and set on the long slide into oblivion.

Courvain had always been under-resourced. A citadel aiming to fulfil Crowl's ambitions should have had its own separate apothecarion, its own autopsy laboratoria, its own tech-priests and its own extensive retinue of skilled operatives. Until Khazad had arrived – quite by accident – they hadn't even employed a specialised assassin. 'Working alone' had been the old man's mantra, as if there was anything particularly impressive about that. It had made him obscure, to be sure, and there was some value in that, but now that many eyes were on them, it felt like a policy of weakness, an indulgent and arrogant inability to trust, to delegate, to give up control.

But then Erunion was getting irritable from fatigue. He was getting fed up of patching storm troopers, or working with the lexmenials on equipment that really needed a true expert, of grabbing meagre ration-sticks when he could and never getting any sleep.

He looked around him. The citadel's observatory was in pretty good shape, compared at least to the rest of the place. It had been spared the ravages of Franck's invasion, and its shielded outer walls hadn't taken much damage during the aerial dogfights. Almost all the main cogitators were functional, though they drew a worryingly large amount of power from the spluttering reactors far below. Menials were all hard at it – several dozen, shuffling between glowing lenses and scribbling results on scraps of parchment. A pair of auto-scribes chittered away, delivering hard copies of virtual-analyses, allowing the more experienced scribes to get on with the real work of interpretation and deciphering.

They were good enough, Erunion thought. Not a patch on a proper savant, like Yulia, but efficient, and used to this kind of work. In the past, of course, Crowl would have been leading the decoding effort himself, along with that damned skull. Once again, the weakness of concentrating everything in one individual was exposed.

The doors to the observatory slid open, and his scrawny head jerked up. Spinoza walked through the doorway, her hair dishevelled and longer than it had been, her shoulders a little more hunched, her skin pallor just a shade greyer, and he rose to meet her.

You're going down the same path, he thought. *They all do the same, sooner or later.*

'Any progress?' Spinoza asked, her voice clear but the weariness evident. She came alongside him. They stood in a shoulder-high trench running around the perimeter of the main cogitator-array, under the shadow of the greater mass of cable-linked equipment, which wheezed and clunked as the valves exhaled.

'Some,' said Erunion. 'I was about to summon you.' He turned to the reams of parchment that lay all around. 'I can give you a summary now, if you–'

'Please do. As concise as you can make it.'

Was that a criticism? Was he prolix? Crowl had never complained.

'We have certain advantages,' Erunion said defensively. 'We already cracked several Mechanicus code-walls as part of earlier work, not least with reference to the transfer from the *Rhadamanthys*. Much of what the assassin recovered can therefore be read, with effort. The challenge, as I told you when this came in, is quantity. It took us several hours just to

orient ourselves. The vast bulk of this is routine, as you'd expect – movements of supplies, requests for physical appointments with Imperial bodies, and so on. But then, I had an idea. You remember the ship, the *Ohtar*? That name was embedded in reverse sequence in the transmissions from the first vessel. We could enter its standard form, 00726174686F, into the binary screeds to narrow down the search. That worked. We began to get material of interest.'

Spinoza gave him a weary smile. 'Very good. Anything on Raskian's whereabouts?'

'Nothing. From what we can see, the priests in Skhallax don't know either. It worries them. They've had representations from the rest of the Council, and they can't act on them. But this tells us very little, since the clearance of these messages is low down the chain, so we can assume that *someone* in the tech-hierarchy knows where he is.' He cleared his throat, which was already too dry. Throne, he could use a drink. Was anyone guarding the stash up in Crowl's chambers? 'We get a repeated phrase – the Interface. That's a common enough term in binharic – we ourselves might use the term rendezvous, or meeting place.'

'For the delegation Franck mentioned.'

'You'd think so. But here's the strange thing – they talk about it as if it's something they're moving around. Something that came down in the *Ohtar*, and which they're transferring somewhere else.'

'No, I was there,' said Spinoza. 'I saw the cargo crate. Room enough for the xenos they transported. Not much else.'

'Yes, it's strange, because the power requirements, which they talk about more than once, are absolutely huge. Which implies a certain sense of scale. So something very big, very cumbersome, appears to have landed in Skhallax with the xenos, and has since been moved.'

'Where to?'

'We can't decipher. Not yet.'

Spinoza took a look at the reams of close-typed runes. 'This feels wrong. The whole point was that they brought the xenos down, and it was small enough to keep secret.'

'But that was always strange, to me at least. Bring it here to do what, exactly? We know it went mad, but even if it hadn't, what was their intention with it? Maybe its presence here wasn't even the main event.

Maybe something else came with it. Something more important, something Raskian needed to get this thing set up.'

Spinoza frowned. 'I'm assuming there's scope for error in these translations.'

Erunion stiffened a little. 'Of course. We're doing what we can.'

'And I'm grateful.' She rubbed at her eyes for a moment, and Erunion got a glimpse of how bloodshot they were. 'What's the time-index on these messages?'

'The most recent is twenty-four days ago. They extend back for a few weeks further.'

'Raskian has been out of communication for that long. His presence requires plenty of power. Could "the Interface" simply be a code for him?'

'It's possible, but he has a range of code names that are used elsewhere. I'd say it's something different.'

'Some kind of xenos tech, then. We assumed, right from the start, that a weapon had been smuggled in – maybe we were part right.'

'Also possible. But here's the puzzle – they brought it to Skhallax, then moved it. Where to? And why not take it to that destination *first*, given all the risk in running the cordon here?'

Spinoza pressed her fingertips together, furrowed her brow. 'Crowl told me the xenos wanted to see the Throne for itself. Almost out of morbid curiosity. But that could have been a lie – maybe it *needed* something there, even just a glimpse. But after that, once that was done, things moved off-world. The delegation left, Raskian goes missing – the same process, you'd guess.'

'This may not help, but the chatter from the priests at Skhallax indicates Raskian went back to Mars. They assume their home is suffering from the same effects as Terra, which seems likely. So whatever this thing is–'

'It may well have been taken there.' Spinoza shot him a dry grimace. 'Right from the start, the one place we never wanted to go to.'

'You cannot be intending to follow it.'

'If Crowl did, I will too.'

'Then you're both…' Erunion stopped himself, biting his tongue. 'It would be suicide to try.'

'But maybe they're suffering just as we are, like you said. That might open some doors – if their sensor-nets are compromised, the command centres

damaged.’

Erunion considered listing the reasons why attempting to infiltrate the Red Planet, whatever condition it might be in, was not just foolhardy but positively moronic, and decided against it. Spinoza would know them all. The fact she was even considering it made him wonder if her mind, too, was starting to turn.

‘More scraps may turn up,’ he said. ‘We have many weeks’ worth of-material to crack and analyse.’

‘I appreciate that, chirurgeon, but we do not have that long.’

‘How long?’

Spinoza straightened, pushed her shoulders back. ‘I cannot tell you yet. Anything you get that might change this picture, signal me the moment you get it. Otherwise…’ And she gave him a knowing, resigned look.

‘You’ll give it a try,’ Erunion said, unable to think of anything worse. ‘Very well, I’ll keep at it.’

Revus did not take the rest period. At least, he took the minimal amount he could – a soporific to knock him out, then a chime to wake him after two hours, then a stimm to bring him back into full capacity. The combination, as ever, made him feel terrible, as if his brain had been steeped in sewage then wrenched out, but the training helped. You learned that quickly in the service – the rituals, the routines. Under-armour on, uniform snapped in place, weapon checked, helm checked, machine-spirits activated. Once the matt-black plates were tight against his flesh, enclosing him in the shell of Inquisitorial authority, you could begin to forget about any inner human weakness, maybe forget that you were human at all – just a weapon, a tool, a means to an end. That helped.

He emerged from his private chamber, blinking hard to clear the last grogginess from his eyes, then he was marching through the darkness, routes so familiar he could have traced them blind. Hegain was just where he expected him to be – in the garrison’s augur-room, sat before banks of strobing lenses. Other figures shuffled around in the cramped darkness, sliding data-slates and slugs into transmission nodes. The machinery crackled and hummed with the constant chatter of input signals.

Hegain started to rise when Revus came in, but Revus waved him back down and took the empty seat next to him. Together they looked up at the

angled lenses, their faces bathed in swimming green phosphor glow.

‘You ran into an inquisitor,’ Revus said.

‘Yes, indeed we did so,’ said Hegain. ‘And that is the main activity I am performing at this moment – adapting the citadel’s longer-range detectors for the profile of the vehicles this one was using. Nighthawks, I believe for the most part, though I am informed that others may also be present, and must be accounted for.’

‘You were briefed by the assassin?’

‘Most thoroughly, in all aspects. She made a careful study while she was with him. Very complete, I have to admit.’

Revus’ gaze switched back to the main schematics. A network of delicate lines spidered out from Courvain at the centre, overlaid with all the complexity of the tangled urban landscape beyond. In normal times, the display would have been stuffed to the edges with moving aircraft, though now the blips of phosphor indicating an active target were sparse and slow-moving. A second cogitator bank processed all the signals, comparing them to filters supplied by the unit operator. No Nighthawk-class gunships had been detected, nor anything else habitually used by Terra’s many Inquisitorial retinues, but Zijes was of course capable of commandeering anything he took a fancy to. The trick was to search for patterns of movement, the kind of thing that would give away a planned assault. As it happened, the attack launched by Franck had actually been detected from a fair distance out using such measures, but the sheer numbers sent against them, together with their speed, had quickly overwhelmed their countermeasures. They had to hope that this new threat was not quite of the same magnitude.

‘You will need to expand the filter range,’ said Revus. ‘All attack craft on the records for Astra Militarum regiment the Palatine Sentinels, Terran depots.’

Hegain nodded smartly, already getting to work on the algorithms. ‘Aye, captain. It shall be just so.’

‘The moment you get a fix, alert me.’

‘It shall be just so.’

‘They may well remain at observation range – calibrate the scans for high altitude.’

‘It shall be–’

‘Yes, yes. What is that?’

Hegain adjusted the focus to home in on a cluster of signals to the extreme north-east of the scan range. They were not moving fast, but did appear to be coordinated. He zoomed in a little closer, right up to the edge of the scanners’ range.

‘Mm. I do not know, in all truth. Commercia traffic, I might say, maybe in convoy, if the times were of a different kind. What do you think of it?’

Revus studied the blips for a little longer. Hard to tell, at such range. Almost probably nothing to do with them. Still, if you wanted to conceal an approach…

‘Dispatch a remote skull. Two of them. Get an auspex feed, then get it analysed.’ He pushed back away from the console. ‘You see anything similar on the augurs, even at range, do the same.’

Spinoza was right, Revus thought, as he moved across to a different terminal. Time was short. They either remained in place for their enemies, supine like the dumb masses in the habs, or broke out now, forged their own path. He felt the tick of impatience, the need to be ahead of the game. And yet, unless Spinoza knew something she wasn’t talking about, they had almost no leads to follow. Was Crowl still on Terra? If he wasn’t, where was he? Could they follow him now, even if they wanted to?

He cleared the lens before him, inserted a capsule with the material he’d taken from Erjab, and started to shunt it into the system. It would be hard work to siphon through it – incomplete lists of detected take-offs and landings gleaned from a number of ports within range of Salvator. None of them were scheduled, and the vast majority – perhaps all – would be military, with call signs and idents that he’d have to work to uncover.

But maybe, just maybe, there would be something there. In such times, something might have been missed that would normally have been picked up – a trail, no matter how faint, ready to be latched on to.

Revus started the filter, bringing up the first docket of scheduling information.

[[SP: Altara 9: Comp. 5: Sigil: XX8-1, XX8-2, XX8-3, XX8-8, XX8-13: Completus: Militarum: IIK]]

As soon as his eyes ran across the line of terse runes, he felt his impatience joined by a deep weariness. He was not a scribe. This would be tedious, and possibly entirely futile.

But it had to be done. Drawing in a long sigh, he got to work.

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CHAPTER TEN

The skimmer came in at the dead of night, running fast. It was a strange thing – like a brass-lined jewel, with glossy leaf-shaped flanks and a high prow. Its engines burned brightly in the shifting gloom, kicking out less filth than a regular flyer and with a strange shimmer to its afterburner plumes.

Spinoza did Albujar the courtesy of meeting him in the receiving hangar. It was still dangerous to travel across the city, and Clodia had done her a considerable favour by sending her liaison officer in person. ‘No point in risking a failed comms transmission,’ the rogue trader had told her over – it was true – a very bad connection. ‘In any case, Albujar likes talking about this kind of thing. He’ll want to tell you how hard it’s all been and how clever he is.’

‘My sincere thanks for coming,’ Spinoza said to him, once the robed adept had clambered down the extendable ladder. In the low light of the hangar, the still-cooling craft, wreathed in steam, almost looked xenos-built itself. Throne only knew where Clodia had got it, or had it made.

‘A pleasure, interrogator. And what an interesting place you have here.’

They travelled up to Crowl’s private chamber. As they went, Spinoza again

felt the heavy tug of weariness. It had been far too long since she'd slept properly. She would have to take a rest period soon – just a few hours – but with things as they were, there hadn't been the chance.

'How is the trader?' she asked as they walked, as much to keep herself awake as anything.

Albujar smiled. 'As good as ever,' he said, looking at her sidelong. 'She'll be in irritatingly good health long after the rest of us have gone to our eternal sanctuary.'

Having met her, Spinoza didn't feel like disagreeing. 'Here we are,' she said, pushing the heavy doors open. 'Take a seat.'

Once settled at the table, Albujar pulled a heavy canvas bag onto the tabletop and retrieved a pile of items – the book Spinoza had taken from Jarrod's hab, another two books of his own bound in deep red leather, a data-slate, some kind of handheld analyser, a quill with an iron tip and a screw-top inkwell. Before he could make use of any of them, Gorgias lurched up from wherever he had been lurking and swayed overhead, his eye a curious blotchy violet.

'You have no objection to the skull being present?' Spinoza asked.

Albujar looked up at Gorgias with interest. 'Some sentience in this one?'

'Imbecilicus,' Gorgias blurted. 'Yes-yes. Very much. *Commenco*.'

'His manners are a little rough,' said Spinoza. 'But he has as much experience of this kind of thing as any of us.'

Albujar cleared his throat, spread the material across the surface. 'It was hard, as expected,' he said. 'I flatter myself that not many would have had any chance to interpret it. This inquisitor of yours must have been a master of his craft.'

Of course he had been. Crowl never associated with fools.

'I know your time is precious,' he went on. 'You must understand one thing, though – these runes are not just a matter of glyphs to be decoded. They have very complex relationships to one another. The semantics are modifiable in ways that humans have trouble tracking. Even once you've penetrated the surface layer of meaning, you have to contend with the metaphorical nature of it all. They never speak literally, the xenos. Or, to be more accurate, the distinction between literal and metaphorical means very little, if anything, to them. So even if you decode a sigil, and then its relations to the ones around it, you're just at the start, and then it'll all start

shifting again.’

Spinoza listened patiently, though in truth this was nothing she didn’t already know. ‘But Jarrod wrote these signs.’

‘He did. Not easy. Don’t think I ever met a human who could actually generate this stuff. But that makes it all the harder, in a way – I had a nagging worry that some thorny bits were just incorrect, and that if I couldn’t make head nor tail of it, then it was because it was gibberish. A poor copy, full of mistakes.’

Spinoza placed her hands together. ‘But, all that being said…’

‘Here’s what I’m reasonably sure of. It concerns a journey. A movement of people from one place to another. Or possibly one state of being to another. Jarrod has sketched out a map of some kind – a representation of this movement. Not a physical map, though – not a list of spatial nodes or vectors or anything like that. More like a story, a way to explain how to go about moving from the start to the end.’

‘So this was intended as instructions to interpret?’

‘Possibly.’

‘And what sense can you make of it?’

‘There’s no destination. Not one I could determine. No planet, no star system, no sector. Maybe this was already known to whoever this script was intended for, and all they needed was some description of a start point. Or it’s possible I just misunderstood it.’

Spinoza glanced up at Gorgias, knowing that the skull would be keeping a record of all of this. ‘Then how about the start point?’

‘Not much better. I have a list of possible interpretations for you. “The lesser sister”. “The home of the makers”. “The ancient forge”. “The bloodied crone”.’

Spinoza felt her patience begin to fray. She had never been a fanciful soul, given to poetical ways. ‘I am unsure how much use any of this can be to us,’ she said.

‘I sympathise, interrogator.’ Albujar reshuffled some of the materials with skeletal hands, as if that might help. ‘I can only offer a few further suppositions. You’re seeking your master, who went missing a matter of weeks ago. I don’t think this text is anything like so recent. Jarrod was a member of the Ordo Xenos, yes? A senior figure. Perhaps, after meeting your master, he consulted the archives. Objects that were stored in the

Palace vaults, places only he would have ready access to. Maybe this transcription was taken from something written a long time ago, stored there, but which Jarrod thought relevant somehow. These sigils are just the notes he took – things to jog his memory. Perhaps he was able to give Crowl a fuller picture when they spoke. If so, it might help me, possibly, to know more of the circumstances of their meeting. Otherwise my guesses are just… guesses.'

'Crowl was hunting someone,' she said. 'A group, sent from Terra, in secret, to meet with a third party, possibly xenos, somewhere undisclosed. The delegation left some time – a matter of days, possibly – before his own disappearance. We do not know whether Crowl was able to catch up with them. If we can, we will attempt to follow them both. At present, we have very little data upon which to make a judgement. I had hoped that this transcription would give us more.'

Albujar nodded. 'You'll know what they say of the aeldari. The way they can appear on a world with no warning, only to disappear again just as fast. What starship captains say, meeting small-tonnage vessels in the deep void that should never have been able to get so far unaided. We used to speculate about it, Clodia and I, when we were in the black. Exactly what devices they used, to bypass the long warp stages that we had to haul through. They guard the truth of them. Why wouldn't they? They know what we're like, what we'd do if we got our hands on their secrets.'

'So the text is a description of this capability.'

'It would fit the picture you're giving me. And perhaps it's the only chance you have now, given what else we know.' He gave an equivocal shrug. 'It wouldn't help, would it, for me to give you a cartographic reference, because there's no way off Terra, not via conventional means. So it must be a cheat. A trick. And the aeldari are masters of that.'

Spinoza felt the old weariness creeping up on her again. She tried to focus on the scribbled runes on Albujar's parchment leaves, and could barely read a single one of them. This was *something*, but it was vague, elusive, hardly enough to hang a set of commands from.

'I can keep these?' she asked. 'Your reports, your notes?'

'Of course. I have put them into as good an order as I could, given the time I had.'

'Thank you.'

‘Sorry not to have been more use. I sense disappointment. I sense that this will not be enough for you.’

That was possible. But a worse alternative existed: that this was quite enough, and only confirmed her worst fears about where they would have to move on to next.

The home of the makers. The lesser sister.

‘We will see,’ she said, working to keep the foreboding from her voice, forcing a grim smile. ‘The Throne never gives its servants an easy path, lest we weaken and grow indolent. Praise be for that.’

No rest after that. Spinoza and Gorgias pored over Albujar’s notes, just in case there was something more concrete there. It became clear that the scribe had worked extremely hard, just as Clodia had promised he would. For all that, most of his texts remained a mess of half-solid meanings and multiple interpretations.

Courvain had its own store of xenos-related literature in Huk’s old vaults, though many volumes had been destroyed during Franck’s attack. Those that remained were often as much propaganda as scholarly aids, with titles such as *The Perfidious Aeldari and Their Devious Ways*, *A Study into the Lies and Trickery of the Malignant Xenos Called Aeldari*, and *The Full Armour of Holy Knowledge Arraigned Against the Many False Weapons of the Hateful Xenos-Breed*. Some of the contents of such volumes were complete speculation, written by scholiasts who had never left the depths of a scrivener’s spire, though scraps of true knowledge could be found there buried in all the guesswork and exaggeration. The style of exposition ranged from the sober – *The aeldari do not draw a clean distinction, I judge, between the biological and the technological, and for them the craft of the mechanic and the chirurgeon are much the same* – to the fantastical – *They do not, it is believed, have Hearts, nor Generative Organs, nor Spleens, nor do they Consume Solid Matter, preferring to Ingest Sustenance through Flutes of some Uncanny Metallic Devising.*

Spinoza had everything that might conceivably be useful taken up from the charred archives and placed into secure crates for transit. Leaving Gorgias to obsess over the remainder of Albujar’s scribblings, she put in a call to Revus.

‘Anything solid?’ she asked.

‘Nine threat-sites isolated,’ the captain replied. *‘Skulls dispatched to all. Nothing certain yet.’*

‘Your assessment?’

‘Attack imminent.’

‘Agreed. Tell Hegain to ready the Spiderwidow for immediate departure, double the augur-watch for solid signals, then report here.’

After that she made similar summons to Khazad, Aneela and Erunion. Time was almost up, but the command staff still needed to be briefed. They gathered in the council chamber. By then, Khazad and Revus were armoured and ready to go.

‘The webway,’ Spinoza said, once the heavy doors had clanged shut.

‘Albujar told you that?’ asked Erunion.

‘He was careful not to use the word. It is proscribed knowledge, so he was no doubt being cautious.’ She leaned forward, elbows on the table. ‘It was always a possibility. Consider the xenos Crowl discovered – one of the pain-bringers. We know so little about them, save for their place of origin – a no-place, out of reach of our fleets, hidden in the folds of reality. It came here via a physical route, because there is no portal into the webway anywhere close to Holy Terra. How could there be? It would have been discovered aeons ago, and destroyed. So it had to use a ship on the way in, but this was dangerous. While it is difficult, but possible, to conceal the presence of a single body, it is much harder to repeat the trick with a whole delegation, some members of which are as high profile as it is possible to be.’

‘So that was why they brought it,’ said Revus. ‘To create the way back.’

Spinoza nodded, then looked over at Erunion. ‘The Mechanicus project – the Interface. It is not an object. There was no room for machinery of any magnitude, not on the transporters we infiltrated. It is knowledge. A way for them to progress the Project without the risk of standard warp travel. The xenos was brought here, among other things, to enable the return journey. Maybe its madness took it over once it was due to go back. Or maybe there *was* some reason it had to get close to the Throne. Whatever the truth, it had already done enough. Something was transferred – plans, documents, even instruments. Enough to give Raskian a route to the hidden realm, the place where he hopes to complete his deal.’

‘Possible,’ said the chirurgeon sceptically. ‘That would keep them out of

sight. But very, very dangerous. It is *their* realm, that place. The knowledge is forbidden for a reason.'

'We do not know the terms of the bargain,' said Spinoza. 'It is hard to imagine that Franck's delegation holds the upper hand here – this is something desperate, something born of terror, and convening in such a place is not the greatest of the risks they are running.'

'But you say it yourself,' said Khazad. 'There is no portal on Terra.'

'*Was* no portal,' corrected Spinoza. 'Do we really believe that these creatures are incapable of making new entrances to their network, if they need to?' She took in a deep, heavy breath. 'This is what I believe, having studied everything we took from the Mechanicus cache, as well as the translations from Jarrod. The Mechanicus have opened a new portal, with help, into the webway. Franck's delegation has travelled into it, either in hopes of emerging to a distant physical location, or maybe to conduct their business within the no-realm itself. In this way they hope to remain entirely secret, their progress hidden from any possible Imperial scrutiny.'

'And Lord Crowl, you think, came to the same judgement?' asked Revus.

'Jarrod gave him more to go on than we had. And he has an… *affinity* to such things now.' The words left a bitter taste in her mouth. She still hated to think of the way the xenos had got into his head. 'Consider it. Franck knew that the cataclysm was coming, more than anyone else. He knew the Fortress' failure would plunge Terra into darkness. Was that part of the scheme? I doubt it. But they could use the chance – let the Beacon fail, becalm every battleship in the system, turn all eyes outward to the horrors in the void, while the Project continues unimpeded, invisible, safe from harm.'

'But… on Terra?' ventured Khazad again, still looking unconvinced.

'Not quite,' said Spinoza. 'Even weakened as this world is, opening a portal here could surely not go undetected. The comms we intercepted from the grav-barge spoke of moving equipment off-world. If I had to guess, I'd say some material was constructed or assembled at Skhallax, then lifted elsewhere. We know Raskian was on Terra until several weeks ago, just prior to the cataclysm striking. Enough time to orchestrate an off-world deployment of whatever they had made. If the destination were within sub-warp range – that would allow transit even after the Beacon fell. Which would also mean that, if Lord Crowl was of the same mind–'

‘Then he could have followed them,’ said Revus. ‘I studied logs from voidports within easy range of Courvain. Many, many logs. Most terminals were shut down before Lord Crowl disappeared, with only military traffic registering. One, though – Adria – had an unscheduled departure of one of its mothballed cargo mules, made without authorisation and somehow evading the port gunners on the way up. No evidence it was him, but that is not an easy feat to pull off.’

‘Where was it headed?’ asked Aneela.

‘Unknown. Once it left the port’s proximal scanners, it disappeared.’ Revus smiled wryly. ‘Again, not easy to do.’

‘But this is weak stuff,’ said Erunion, his thin face as sour as ever. ‘A few datalines from a Mechanicus barge, some scribbles from a retired scribe, a rogue cargo mule.’

‘No doubt,’ said Spinoza. ‘We should seek more evidence, interrogate our sources. As you may have observed, though, our ability to do any of that is curtailed. I need to leave. Now. This place will come under attack again if I remain, and we are too weak to fight a determined enemy off.’

‘So you plan to run this down? To where?’

Now it was Spinoza’s turn to smile dryly, a gesture born as much from sheer exhaustion as resignation. ‘You know where, Erunion.’

‘And I told you that was madness. Insanity. In what? A gunship? You’d last a few seconds, once you broke orbit.’

‘And I told you there is always a way. If they wish to be secret, we can do the same. We are not without tricks of our own.’

‘And suppose you made it? What are you looking for, exactly? Mars is a big place, capable of hiding whatever secrets it chooses.’

‘You sent me the energy signatures of the Interface. The ones you calculated yourself from those transmissions. They were huge, and they were very specific. Unless that work was all suboptimal, it gives us something to scan for.’

Erunion started to object again, then looked up into Spinoza’s eyes, saw the calm resolution there, and shook his head abjectly. ‘I can work those figures up,’ he mumbled. ‘Get them more precise. Throne, though. *Throne*.’

‘I do not see it,’ said Khazad, frowning. ‘They open a door. They send delegation through. Maybe. But then they do not forget about it. They guard it. More than they guard anything else. We have no chance to follow, even

if you are right about location.’

‘You do not have to come with us, Niir,’ said Spinoza. ‘Not if the prospect scares you.’

Khazad flushed, her fingers curling into fists, before she detected that it was a jest.

‘But this is what we have,’ Spinoza continued. ‘I believe it is what Crowl had. Our first task must be to follow the trail, to see if it indeed exists, and if he went the same way. That, at least, should be possible. Only then, and only if these guesses are correct, can we think about what to do next.’

Apply, interrogate, and the answers will come.

Revus sat back, linking his hands behind his head. ‘I have one more question. Suppose we–’

He didn’t get to finish. A priority signal flashed up on both his and Spinoza’s collars, followed by Hegain’s voice over the secure comm.

‘Apologies, lord,’ he said, speaking calmly but urgently. *‘Positive response from a skull-unit, two hundred kilometres out. Multiple airborne signals, moving into attack pattern, closing fast. A major chance that–’*

‘We are the target,’ said Spinoza, shooting Erunion a significant look. ‘Very good, sergeant. Take your position and await clearance to launch.’

She cut the link, placed both palms on the tabletop and pushed herself to her feet.

‘We will make the exit visible enough – that may be sufficient to draw them off,’ Spinoza said, speaking to Aneela. ‘Once we are out, though, you will coordinate defences with Tallis and the remaining garrison. Full lockdown protocol. No exceptions – fire on anything that gets close, all blast shutters sealed.’

Aneela rose with the others and bowed smartly. Erunion looked full of misgiving, but did the same. Khazad had clearly not been convinced either, though Revus had nothing but a tight eagerness on his grizzled face.

‘Courvain needs its inquisitor,’ Spinoza said, reaching for her helm and already mentally running down the checklist she had spent the last few days planning. ‘By the Grace of the Throne, we will find him, and we will bring him home.’

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hegain kicked on the power, watching the Spiderwidow's console runes flicker into the launch-speed indicator. The hangar shook as the rumbling turbine-growl flared up into a roar. Warning klaxons went off, accompanied by a whirl of amber lumens down the exit ramp.

'Crew-hold secure?' he asked his co-pilot, one of the younger members of his squad named Treska.

She nodded, her flight-helm looking overlarge atop a slight frame, her fingers expertly flicking switches and twisting dials. 'Hatches sealed, clamps released. Ready to go, sergeant.'

Hegain shoved the control column into drive and the huge transport thundered down the ramp towards the raised blast doors. The hangar filled with a swirling cloud of black smoke, gathering at the edges of the forward viewers like fingers clawing down the armaglass, before the ship hit the exit and shot clear of the citadel with an echoing boom. It was the dead of night, and the vast world-city reared up ahead of them, darker than he'd ever seen it, a forest of jagged nightshade spires against a turbid, bloodshot sky.

Hegain brought up the coordinates given to him by Spinoza, then wheeled the Spiderwidow heavily to starboard, tilting the horizon close to vertical.

The engines hammered up to their full heat and power, kicking out fresh gouts of smoggy backdraught. Courvain's spiked shoulder disappeared into the gloom behind them, swiftly lost under the shadow of the greater spires. Treska activated the ship's augurs, and the console lit up with spidery tactical displays. The cockpit rattled as the ship blasted through a patch of thick turbulence, and Hegain kept both hands clamped firmly on the controls.

'Signals?' he asked, edging up to maximum speed.

'Already closing,' reported Treska, adjusting the feeds from the augur arrays and filtering the results. 'At speed, bearing nine-two-four. Calculating numbers.'

Hegain pushed the gunship tightly around the crest of a hunchbacked hab-spire, its thousands of tiny windows mostly dormant or glowing from internal fires, before boosting towards a narrow cleft set between looming chem-refineries. The skull-studded western front of a cathedral-complex blurred past in the night, its many high clerestories blackened and gaping.

'Six atmospherics,' Treska said. 'Thunderbolts.'

Hegain grinned. 'Ah, that is a fine machine, in all honesty. I have flown one myself, and enjoyed it immensely – very fast, very strong. Of course, it was a Navy vehicle, and I had no business being anywhere near to it, let alone inside the cockpit. But I doubt that these pilots now coming for us are Navy either, do you? No rule so often broken, I think, in the entirety of the whole Imperium, than this one. I would judge, and place some coin, on those pilots being Militarum. Not that it would stop them following us, if we attempted to break for the void, even if they risked detection by something sitting in geostat with Naval scrutinisers on board.'

Hegain knew that his garrulousness amused those he served with. Compared to Revus, who never used two words if one would do, he was a positive orator. It could be mistaken, that tendency, for nervousness, or even a desire to please. It was nothing of the kind. Talking calmed him, focused his mind, kept his reactions sharp. Even his instructors at the old schola had recognised that after a while, noting how he hit all his target-servitors clean through the forehead while chuntering away to himself. So they had stopped trying to beat the habit out of him, and let him work out his own method of control.

Treska had served alongside him for long enough to let the chatter wash

over her. She concentrated on trajectories and velocities. A Thunderbolt fighter had a shorter range than the Spiderwidow, which was based heavily on the Storm Eagle chassis, but it was faster, more manoeuvrable, and would be able to follow them right up into the troposphere and beyond.

'They're closing into attack range,' she intoned calmly, working the figures.

'How long?'

'Six minutes.'

Hegain grunted. 'We'll stay low. We'll keep below the spire-line. We'll see, in all things, if we can shake them off in those places.'

The gunship's nose dropped, and soon it was hurtling along the chasms, its night-black profile lost in the churn of toxic haze. The cockpit's forward viewers glittered with cartolith overlays, tracing out a rotating map of the urban press ahead.

The fighters followed them down, becoming visible on the rear viewers – a pack of sharply angling, blunt-nosed smears of pitch-black against the roil of the clouds. Their outsized turbines spat fire-flecks as their pilots churned through the soupy air, the autocannon mounts sparking against the hard friction of their abrupt jinks and drops.

'They are now within targeting range,' Treska said, dispatching blooms of chaff from the rear hoppers in case the Thunderbolts carried air-to-air missiles.

'Noted,' said Hegain, dropping the gunship yet further and sending it skimming across the pinnacles of an Ecclesiarchy prayer-tower before yanking it round to port and blasting sharply upwards. The Spiderwidow was a big and ugly hunk of adamantium and plasteel, but it had truly colossal engines and could be made to skip through a confined space with a capable enough pilot at the helm.

The curtains of filth broke for a moment, riven by a sudden blast from a gas vent, illuminating a tight gap under a heaped and gaudy ceremonial arch. Once they had passed through that, the cramped spaces narrowed further as the landscape dissolved into a derelict procession of burned-out warehouses and storage towers – a place you might lose a tail, if you used it well.

Hegain powered back up to full straight-line speed, keeping the gunship's belly just a metre or so from the vanes and turrets below. The first hard

bangs of the Thunderbolts' autocannons scythed past, sprayed wildly at range but still coming close to clipping his wings.

The Spiderwidow shot through the gap, barely missing the arch's nearside support, then swerved round, boosting cleanly for the first of the echoing warehouse shells. The Thunderbolts screamed in close behind, using their superior manoeuvrability to pull tighter turns. The lead fighter opened up again, smacking rounds into the racing warehouse walls and blowing the cinder blocks and rockcrete into clouds of debris.

'Warning shots,' said Treska.

'Aye,' said Hegain grimly, straining to pull every gram of power from his atmospheric drives. 'They do not wish to destroy us. Damn it to all the hells, but this is going to be a challenge.'

He hauled the gunship's nose up suddenly, dragging the ship's weight away to port and risking a stall to gain altitude. A blurred line of crumbling eaves swam up in front of them briefly, before giving way to empty sky and revealing a clear run between high enclosing buttresses. The Spiderwidow's prow dipped again as Hegain reapplied full power, kicking it forward like a hurled stone and sending afterburner plumes snarling out into the night.

It wasn't enough. The Thunderbolt pilots were just as good, just as adaptable. Two of them, staying close the whole way through the gap, found their range and raked the gunship's rear. Bullets chewed their way into the outtakes, clanging and pinging through the machinery and blowing up the superheated metals. Two more fighters scored high above, overtaking the Spiderwidow and cutting off the aerial escape route.

'Throne of Terra,' spat Hegain, struggling with the controls. A heavy mass of cracked and teetering masonry spun out of the gloom ahead, only just avoided.

'Losing power, sergeant,' Treska reported, her voice betraying the first whisper of alarm.

The terrain ahead opened up again, revealing a familiar landscape of lower-profile habs and Ministorum buildings. The Spiderwidow started to judder, coughing brown smoke from its fuselage, even as more rounds clanged into the armour plates, prising them off and cutting deep into the workings.

'Prepare for landing,' Hegain said, isolating a stage some five hundred metres off. It was abandoned, seemingly, the windswept expanse free of any

other vehicles, and perched high up on the edge of a bulbous spire-pinnacle. ‘I will attempt it there.’

Doing so was easier said than done. More hits came in, striking freely now, punching holes through the stabilisers and cracking the viewpanes. They weren’t kill-shots, but still ruinous enough to be sure of stripping the gunship’s defences and forcing it down.

Hegain, fighting hard to prevent a full-speed crash, managed to angle the Spiderwidow over the lip of the stage before the starboard turbine finally blew into slivers of spinning metal, and the entire transport thudded to the deck. The gunship skidded for a few metres, wreathed in sparks and smoke, before crashing into the stage’s far-end barrier and shuddering to an ignominious halt.

The Thunderbolts swooped in soon after, dropping out of the skies, swivelling neatly, then killing their power and skating down across the apron. All six pilots blew open their cockpit canopies and leapt to the deck. As they sprinted over to the downed Spiderwidow, a far larger vessel hove into range above them and set down amid gouts of steam and thruster-discharge – a heavier Militarum troop transport in Palatine Sentinel colours that thunked heavily on extended pads and disgorged its passengers in a scrum of armoured bodies. By the time Hegain and Treska had shut down the Spiderwidow’s engines and taken up their sidearms, more than thirty-troopers had them surrounded, with more rapidly taking up positions around the landing stage’s rim.

Hegain disembarked, his hellpistol held level. Treska came down after him. Grit and ash gusted around them, whipped up by the thermals and eddies between the spire-clusters. A hot-metal stink of overworked and-damaged machinery competed with the earthier tang of burned refuse piled up along the stage’s derelict edges.

The Sentinels’ commander emerged – a tall woman dressed in enclosed carapace armour, overlaid with the pale ivory-and-gold tabard of her regiment. A captain’s uniform. She took off her helm as she approached, exposing a soldier’s face – hard-edged, taut, with a network of raised scars running down her jawline.

‘Captain Skele Antrisa,’ she said crisply. ‘Twenty-Fourth Terran Battalion, Palatine Sentinels. Surrender your vessel.’

Hegain stood his ground. ‘We are travelling under Inquisitorial sign,’ he

said. ‘Did you miss our code-signal? If I were you, captain, I would retreat now, in all haste, before this outrage gets out.’

Antrisa looked unimpressed. ‘We are aware of the status of your passengers. Open the doors – I need to speak to your interrogator.’

Hegain kept his pistol aimed squarely at her. ‘We are on a private mission. Nothing to do with the Militarum. I say it again – retreat now.’

Antrisa made a minuscule gesture with her left hand, and over forty lasguns clicked their safeties off. ‘Luce Spinoza. I need to speak to her. Open the doors. You have ten seconds before my troops open fire.’

Hegain glanced over at Treska, who hadn’t backed down. He looked across the ranks of disciplined troopers, assessing how quickly they would break into the gunship once they had killed the two of them. A minute or two, no more.

He holstered his pistol. ‘This will be reported,’ he said, backing carefully towards the Spiderwidow’s crew-hatch. ‘Your names will be recorded. Retribution will come.’ He deactivated the outside locks, pulled the bolts back, and hauled the hatch open.

When Albujar staggered out into the open, looking somewhat sick from the turbulent ride, Antrisa gave Hegain a weary glare.

‘The interrogator.’

Hegain looked nonplussed. ‘This is my passenger. I was charged with returning him to his fortress. That’s all I know about.’

Albujar coughed weakly, and shot Antrisa an uncertain smile. ‘All under the protective warrant of rogue trader Ferve Clodia. Perfectly legitimate, just as the sergeant says. You have no grounds to impede me.’

Antrisa motioned for four of her soldiers to search the crew compartment. They piled inside, with one emerging a moment later, shaking his head.

‘I require the interrogator,’ said Antrisa insistently. ‘The matter is urgent.’

‘Then you can make communication with her in the usual way,’ said Hegain. ‘Preferable, if you ask me, to shadowing us for days, intercepting our comms, forcing our gunships down. Not a friendly way to behave, really.’

‘I do not think you understand what is at stake here, sergeant.’

Hegain shot her a crooked smile. ‘No doubt. I am not the sharpest of instruments in the Emperor’s tool bag. But I have my orders, and I have my oaths. Interrogator Spinoza is busy with her own urgencies, and cannot

spare time to unpick mysterious interventions from outside parties. Too many hostile guns have been pointed at us of late, you know? A wearisome habit, and one we would like to break.' He gestured towards Albujar. 'My passenger is in the right of it. You have no business impeding his progress. If you have not quite destroyed my transport entirely with your enthusiasms, I intend to take him the rest of the way.'

For the first time, Antrisa looked properly irritated. 'Spinoza's location. Time is short.'

Hegain sighed. 'Come then, captain. Do you truly think I would have been given that information? In the knowledge that you were tracking us? Take us with you, if you wish. Try your best to dig it out. But I can save you the time – I have no earthly idea. Neither does my co-pilot, and neither does my passenger. The interrogator is not at her citadel, and she is not here.'

'I could test that,' she said eventually, her voice low.

Hegain's eyes never left hers. 'Assuredly. But I have nothing to hide, and you have nothing to gain, except maybe more lost time. You would do better, I think, to tell whoever sent you that things have moved on, and that the guns of such a fine and noble regiment would be better served bringing some order to this sorry world.' He lowered his voice. 'We are both soldiers, you and I. You have better things to be doing than this.'

Another cold stare. Antrisa had very pure blue eyes, ones that barely seemed to blink.

Then, finally, she looked away again. A flurry of battle-sign followed – *withdraw, return to base*.

'Your citadel will remain under observation,' she said, turning smartly to stride back to the carrier. 'This charade achieves little. Spinoza will be found, one way or another. Where, after all, can she go?'

They had left just prior to the Spiderwidow's launch. Eight of them: Spinoza, Revus, Khazad, Gorgias and four storm troopers from Revus' command group – Marax, Slovia, Gereg, Hosh. All were in full armour, reconditioned and serviced as well as Erunion had been able to manage. The storm troopers wore their customary black, with Spinoza alone standing out in her battered crimson plate. They had left on foot through one of the hidden access-hatches deep in Courvain's foundations, breaking into the catacombs beneath and then tracing a winding route through the

tunnels of the underhive. That part of the journey had been tortuous – they had needed to go watchfully, knowing that before long they would encounter the dregs and rabble still infesting the lightless places. Sporadic fighting had broken out on three separate occasions, forcing the troopers to purge the stinking chambers of their near-blind and starving occupants. Spinoza had even been obliged to break out Argent during one vicious little brawl, the use of which reminded her of the very first action she had ever taken on this planet.

Not very different, she thought grimly, as she wiped the sacred weapon down. The world might be burning overhead, but down here, where the lumens had never functioned and food had always been scarce and rancid, very little had actually changed. *They are afraid, terrified, all of the time.*

Four kilometres due east, they reached the secure chamber Revus had arranged in advance. The armoured ground transport was there as promised, locked down and concealed under heavy rubberised sheeting and heaps of refuse. Once it had been extracted and powered up, its machine-spirit coaxed into irascible life and its engines thrumming, things got faster. They drove up from the nightmarish lower levels, shunting and revving their way out and into the poorest grades of civilised habs. The crowds of menials who still clung on in those places hurried to get out of their way, shuffling through uncleared wreckage as the transport crashed straight through.

Revus kept up a rapid pace, conscious of the need to get out of sensor range of the citadel before Hegain's gunship could be overtaken. The sergeant was a fine pilot, Spinoza knew, but they had all seen the augur-signals from the last remote skull, which indicated that the numbers would be against an escape. She had to hope that he would be astute enough to avoid significant harm – Albujar's presence with him ought to guarantee that, though in such times there were no sure bets.

Revus took a deliberately complex route, staying as low down in the maze of transitways and access tunnels as he dared, only breaking out into more unclogged thoroughfares once the danger of detection had lessened. As they travelled, their bodies rocking and rattling inside the juddering interior of the heavy ground transport, Spinoza fought hard against the tide of fatigue that had suddenly clamped on to her limbs. The edges of her vision were already blurring, and the heat and the dark of the transport's cab pulled treacherously at her focus.

‘You could rest, lord,’ said Revus as he drove, sitting next to her, hunched forward to peer into the oncoming gloom. ‘We will not reach the voidport for another hour.’

She pulled herself upright, annoyed that she had not kept it hidden. ‘Concentrate on the route, captain,’ she said firmly.

It took more than an hour. Several transitways ahead were entirely blocked, either by hab collapses or burning ganger barricades, so Revus had to loop back and trace different paths. That at least made their journey even harder to trace – they barely broke into the open, rumbling instead down semi-covered access tunnels and deep-founded chasm-bases before finally emerging at nominal ground level as their destination neared.

The thin grey dawn made its token spread across the cloud-barred east as the Adria voidport perimeter came into view. It was a bigger facility than Morgant-9, built for the routine landing of bulk supplies direct from orbit. Storage halls rose up all around it, giant cylindrical structures fifty storeys high with ridged rockcrete walls and no windows. Every open surface seemed to be ringed with flaywire runs and flood-lumen banks. The landing stages themselves reared up beyond the halls, a tiered plateau of heavy receiving plates surrounded by forests of char-black scaffolding and interlocked brace-beams. Armoured control towers speared through the heavy slabs, most still with their marker-lights blinking at the summits. The place appeared to be both powered and defended.

Revus drew the transport up hard against the foundation layer of a neighbouring service tower. The approach to one of many cargo gates lay ahead – a blank screen of metal plates streaked with grime, oil and blood. No movement could be detected on the plaza in front of those gates, nor on the parapets above.

‘Time to see how good your codes are, captain,’ Spinoza said.

They disembarked. Revus was last out, disabling the transport’s machine-spirit interface and killing the power. Gorgias hovered up from the cab’s far side, laden with a heavy loop of incendiaries and stuttering on his grav-plate.

Spinoza realised then that she’d never checked on whether the skull had followed her order and gone for that overhaul. He looked shaky as he approached her, the consistency of his oculus a little irregular. No time now.

‘Swift as you can,’ she told him. ‘We will move as soon as we hear

results.’

‘Affirmativo,’ Gorgias replied, swivelling around and darting off into the shadows. Spinoza watched the skull skitter close in to the perimeter wall, his drives whining, before he disappeared out of view.

The storm troopers drew their weapons and moved up carefully towards the gates, staying in cover. Revus took out a lock-cycler unit and summoned up the codes he’d taken from his analysis of the Morgant-9 data.

A few moments later, a series of booms rang out from the direction Gorgias had headed. Those were followed by explosions that rose high over the habs’ rooflines and set flames licking up to the ramparts of the perimeter boundary. The skull came speeding back into view, spine-tail now free of incumbrance. Spinoza ran a scan ahead then gestured towards the gates.

‘Now,’ she ordered.

The squad sprinted across the gap to reach the cargo door, pressing themselves up against the cracked blockwork frame. Revus slammed the cycler into its slot just as alarms broke out from within the compound. Spinoza heard the sound of engines coughing into life, massed boots running, shouts of alarm. The fires Gorgias had kindled flickered up even higher, raging like a nest of vivid serpents against the rockcrete. The blaze wouldn’t do much serious damage, but it looked impressive and would take some putting out.

Revus’ first code failed, resulting in a spit of machine-objections from the gate’s code-unit. The second went in, processed in a faint chatter of clicks. The heavy gate bolts clunked back and the outer door cracked open.

‘In, in,’ Spinoza snapped.

They broke into a holding chamber – dark now, but with the sigils of the Terran Regio Custos still visible on the bare walls. They ran across the empty deck, reached another door, then a long corridor, then another portal. Where they couldn’t gain access further in with Revus’ codes, krak charges blew the panels open. Most of the voidport guards, already stretched thin by constant low-level attacks across the huge perimeter, had raced off to investigate the firestorm set off by Gorgias – those who remained were easily dispatched with stun-shots.

They reached the first ship vault – a giant mechanised hangar, a hundred metres high and half a kilometre long, with cargo mules hanging in dispatch

cages high up in the shadowy roofs. They were meagre things, those orbital vehicles – less than two hundred metres in length, with cramped cockpits designed for two or three technicians only and the rest of their block-sided bodies given over to thrusters and storage for transit crates.

‘Are those functional?’ Spinoza asked, moving up to the nearest access ladder.

Hosh ran a quick scan from his auspex. ‘Fourth from the left – best mix of diagnostic readings.’

They clambered up the ladders and crawl ways leading up to the suspended cargo mule. Slovia, bringing up the rear, cut the lowest ladder-stage clean away after cresting it, letting the lengths of rusted metal clang to the deck below. Getting into the transport was easy; getting it powered up was less so – none of the vehicles had been well maintained. Revus steadily activated the cockpit systems, Gereg set the release cascade from the terminals on the gantry running alongside, Marax ensured the vault’s upper doors were set to open, Slovia and Hosh warded against any inquisitive guards making their way back into the vaults to take a look.

Spinoza clambered up into the cockpit and took her seat next to Revus. ‘It will fly?’

Revus finished punching in the command sequence, and the console before them flickered into life. ‘It will fly,’ he said, moving on to initiating the launch sequence.

‘Everyone in,’ Spinoza ordered, buckling up. The storm troopers piled through the single crew hatch, stowing their weapons, taking stations in the cramped cockpit and switching to augur-jamming gear. Getting out of the port unscathed required setting up distraction baffles across a narrow band of sensor-ranges, including those of the wall guns. Revus’ list of sensor harmonics made that easier, even assuming the port’s systems were still in anything close to working order.

The interior of the cargo mule sealed tight with a hiss, followed by the echoing clunk of landing legs withdrawing. A heavy door slid open overhead, revealing a vast launch chamber above them. Cranes swung into position, pistons pressurised, chains clanged taut, and the cargo mule was hoisted up into the gaping aperture.

‘Have we been detected yet?’ asked Spinoza, busy setting the parameters for manual launch.

‘They’ve realised something’s up,’ said Revus, checking his proximity scanner. ‘Not soon enough to stop us.’

Spinoza nodded, just as the second huge set of external doors, right at the top of the launch chamber, slowly tracked open. Now the open sky was revealed – a blotchy pattern of grey and black, hedged with the protruding pinnacles of the close-packed spires and control towers. She hit the engine activation, and the chamber below them filled with the blaze of first-stage thrusters.

‘Medium-range orbital scans as soon as we’re out of here,’ she ordered. ‘This thing is unarmed – we ditch it as soon as possible.’

She activated the launch rune. Everybody in the cockpit was thrown back hard into their seats. The cargo mule boosted vertically, its powerful engines hurling it clear of the support rig. The transport shot up through the launch chamber, out of the aperture and into Terra’s near-empty skies. Spinoza immediately veered out of the path of the wall guns, pulling the mule into a steep diagonal climb. The machine’s stabilisers protested – the transport had never been built for evasive manoeuvres – but kept them climbing fast.

Revus switched to atmospheric scans. A paltry flicker of las-fire followed them up from one tower on the voidport’s extreme edge, but the mule was soon beyond its range.

‘Pitiful,’ muttered Spinoza to herself as they picked up speed. ‘It is no wonder everything has fallen apart.’

In truth, though, a place like Adria had always been very far down the food chain, one of tens of thousands of low-grade cargo-processing stations. A cargo mule in itself was of limited use for any other purpose than reaching orbit – it had no weapons, no means of pressing on anywhere else. Once out of the atmosphere, it was little more than a tiny steel box, no threat to anyone or anything.

‘Entering orbital zone Four-F,’ Revus announced, as the worst of the G-forces fell away and the viewers turned from grey to black. Stars spread across the darkening vistas, vivid as the last of the atmosphere dissipated. The cockpit’s grav-enhancers splurted into life, just as the hulls of a hundred becalmed vessels above them hove into view.

‘How about that one?’ asked Spinoza, gesturing on the limited-range scanners towards a bulk hauler lying a few hundred kilometres ahead.

‘Coronis class,’ said Revus doubtfully. ‘It’ll have its own defence forces. I was thinking of that one.’ He gestured towards a low-grade fleet auxiliary anchored a little closer across the curved orbital horizon.

‘Negative. Nothing with a Navy call sign.’

‘*Esto,*’ said Gorgias, making Spinoza start – she hadn’t realised the skull was so close. ‘No, no, *esto*, this-this, here, *perfecto.*’

She looked at where his las-beam intersected the local-space cartolith. He had picked out a system-hauler – a trade-guild conveyer of some kind. Not huge – less than a kilometre long, big-beamed, small-prowed, no clear owner’s marks on the flanks and no escorts in sight.

‘Agreed,’ said both Spinoza and Revus together, which made her smile. ‘Adjusting heading,’ she said. ‘Let us make this look convincing.’

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Captain Silas Jokra headed up to the command bridge, his heavy frame clanking on the metal treads of the ladder between decks. He had only been asleep for six hours, and getting a chime from Kles wasn't welcome. In normal times, six hours might have felt like plenty, but they had been stranded in Terran high orbit for weeks, and that had eroded most aspects of the ship's standard expectations. He was bored. Very bored. And when he was bored, the only thing he felt like doing was sleeping. The *Jove Star 7* was a highly automated ship in any case, with two dozen loader-servitors and a capable crew of thirty. No reason to stay awake, just to stare at that grim circle of dirty grey below them, forever waiting for an invitation to actually commence the loading cycle that he now doubted would ever come.

He reached the top of the ladder, rubbed his slack-fleshed face, and surveyed his domain. Calling it a 'command bridge' was stretching things somewhat – the chamber was poky and smelly, with no proper realviewers or observation domes, but it did have a throne at its heart and a couple of terraces of old cogitators and navigation machines. The lumens hummed uncomfortably, showing up the stains on the plastek consoles, though the

basic functions – sensors, drive controls, life support – were all just about clunking along.

Kles was standing by her station, just below his rotatable throne-dais, data-slate in hand, looking as prim and officious as ever. She had always been a sour woman, one who thought she ought to have been serving on a big Chartist ship plying the deep void, not wasting her few remaining years of commission on a rust-pocked system-hauler. Jokra couldn't help that – he hadn't forced her to forge those fleet college papers. It could have been worse – he'd heard of officers ending up in the bilge-decks after what she'd done – so she should have counted herself lucky and worked on her personal skills, rather than sniffing her way around his ship like she deserved something better.

'What is it?' he slurred, feeling the graze of two-day-old stubble against his fingers as he rubbed at his chin. He had to stop that. It felt like he was forever kneading his own jowls, as if that could somehow conjure some youthful vigour back.

'We're being hailed,' said Kles. All around her, down in the pits below, the half-dozen duty crew got on with their work, none of them looking very eager about it. 'Short-range cargo lifter, call sign *Adria-D-Eight*. I thought you should take a look.'

Wanted to wake me up, more likely. 'What's a lifter doing up here? I thought all the ports were still shut down?'

'They are. As far as we know.'

Jokra grunted, sat heavily in his synth-leather throne, swivelled around to the picter lens-array and punched in his access codes. 'So what do they want?'

'They want to dock.' Kles moved over to Jokra's station, reached over and pushed the comm-summaries to his lens. 'They claim to have launched in error – a drive malfunction. They're venting atmosphere and need to make repairs.'

Jokra chuckled. 'Drive malfunction? Ha. Who're they running from, then?'

Kles' expression didn't change. Kles' expression never changed. 'They claim to have an empty hold. But I ran a scan. Just as protocol demands. Look at this.'

She swiped her stylus on her slate, and the results filtered onto his lens. He

let out a low whistle.

‘Throne of All Virtue. That’s a lot of ration crates.’ He thought for a moment. ‘How much have we got left in the holds?’

‘Three more weeks, current consumption.’ Kles always knew. ‘Though the cisterns are getting low.’

The *Jove Star 7* had only been designed to endure a couple of weeks of enforced orbit. They had already exceeded their maximum comfortable duration without restocking, and soon the stores would begin to taste even fouler than they did already. Who knew how long this wretched embargo would last? Getting anything out of the orbital control stations was pointless, and going back to Jupiter without clearance was expressly forbidden.

He started to rub his chin, and made himself stop. ‘So what do you think?’ he mused, half to himself. ‘Someone trying to get off-world? Someone had to make a hasty move, took damage, now running out of air? We could use some stores. How many crew on that thing?’

‘Seven, as close as we can tell. The lifter is unarmed.’

Jokra gave it some more thought. He watched the rune-blip move steadily across the lens-surface. He watched it bleed oxygen, and watched its engines struggle. ‘Get Hifa to break out the armoury. A carbine for each duty crew member. How many can we rustle up? Twenty? That should do it.’

‘Or we could let someone else pick them up. It’s an unsanctioned flight.’

‘Let someone else take all those crates? No, no. We could use them. If this goes on much longer, we might *need* to use them.’ And you never knew what else might be on a small lifter, one with a desperate crew who couldn’t go elsewhere. It had been a long, lonely sojourn up in the void, and Jokra never liked being without company if he could help it. ‘Protocols are all very well, but it’s not really normal times, is it? Think of the cisterns.’

Kles looked unhappy, but didn’t demur. She gave him that twisted, purse-lipped grimace that told him she disapproved, then bowed sniffily and started to cascade the orders and wake up those who needed waking up. Jokra made the counter-hail himself, just so this mule’s crew would know who was in charge when they arrived.

‘Lifter *Adria-D-Eight*,’ he said, speaking into a vox-caster that made his voice sound as tinny as a prop-vid narrator. ‘Note your request for aid.

Prepare to dock in our main cargo intake. It will be our pleasure to render assistance.’

After that they just had to be careful. Kles got the crew armed up, and they assembled in the cargo hangar. Twenty-five of them, in the end – she was being overcautious.

The *Jove Star 7*, like all vessels of its class and tonnage, had a standard interface for taking on cargo mules. The intake hangar was constructed of two storeys. The upper one was pressurised and lit, suitable for crew to move about freely. The lower one, much bigger, was kept dark and airless, the better for taking in the various crates and pods in the cargo mule’s holds. A craft like the *Adria-D8* was built to slot directly into the arrangement. Its tiny cockpit was perched at the very top and front of the structure, with the blocky cargo hold slung underneath. The engines, guidance systems and comms vanes were similarly arranged on top, so that the hold area could slide into the lower chamber, ready for unimpeded disbursement of supplies. Once docked, the mule sat like an iceberg, its tiny upper layer exposed within the pressurised zone, its lower layer hanging down into the depressurised one. A thick floor bisected the two areas, forming a seal where the deck met the mule’s hull-line.

Jokra arrived at the upper hangar, having taken some time to retrieve his favourite shotgun. Kles was already there, along with the armed crew. The mule had just docked, and its cockpit structure lay a few metres ahead of him, steaming busily as the rime evaporated from its surface. The hatches were still closed.

‘You’ve told them they can get out?’ Jokra asked.

‘No response,’ said Kles, looking dubious. She was wearing a void-suit, just like all the others, but hadn’t sealed her helm yet.

‘Maybe a problem with the hatches,’ Jokra said, gesturing for two of his crew to bring a cutter down from the hangar’s racks. ‘Carve it up.’

The cutter-team hauled the heavy machine up to the cockpit’s outside hatch and got to work. A few seconds of spark-filled beamwork, and they had the seals broken. The lead operator wrenched aside the outer panel and then peered through the gap. A few seconds later, she pulled her head out again and shrugged.

‘It’s empt–’

The lumens blew. Heavy clangs resonated from below, followed by the

massed whine of las-beams slicing through metal.

‘They’re in the cargo chamber!’ Kles shouted, alarmed, before an alert klaxon blared out and combat lighting glowed across the hangar floor. ‘Get down to the–’

She never finished the order. She didn’t have to. In the semi-dark it seemed like a hundred figures just burst into the hangar – from emergency hatches below, from the doors behind, even from roof-access panels above. They moved incredibly fast, loosing bursts of well-aimed las-bolts that smashed kneecaps and punched through arms. One of the intruders flung herself around the place with a flashing amber-gold blade, accounting for five of them all by herself, while another fighter carried some kind of truly enormous power maul that crackled with eye-watering energies. Something properly horrific blundered its way over it all, a flying servo-skull with a blood-red oculus blazing and something wild and unintelligible howling from its vox-emitter.

Jokra hadn’t even managed to get his finger over the trigger before his gun was knocked from his grasp and he was slammed bodily into the hangar wall. His head rebounded from the impact, turning his vision into a blurred mess, just as the lumens came back on.

He twisted his head around, trying to work out what had just happened. By then, his crew lay on the deck, all of them disarmed, their void-suits torn and ruptured. Some were in a fair bit of pain, by the way they writhed around, but none appeared to be dead. It hadn’t been a hundred figures fighting them – just seven, all at ease, their work done. He recognised the night-black livery of Imperial storm troopers, and his heart sank.

The cargo mule was unarmed. He hadn’t needed to let them in.

The grip on his shoulder released, and he shakily turned to face his captor. It was the one with the maul – a stocky woman in crimson armour. She slid her helm-visor up.

‘You could have just… asked,’ Jokra told her weakly.

‘I do not believe in taking chances,’ the woman said, showing him her rosette. ‘This ship is now under the command of the Holy Orders of the Emperor’s Inquisition. You will take us where I wish for the duration of this mission. After that, your property will be returned to you. Do you understand?’

Jokra tried to collect his senses. He glanced to one side, and saw Kles

clutching a blown-out knee in obvious distress. That was something, at least.

‘You don’t have any supplies in that hold, do you?’ he ventured, feeling like he already knew the answer.

‘You will have to share what you have with us,’ the interrogator said, turning to what looked like her deputy and giving some kind of battle-sign command. ‘Do not worry, captain – whatever happens, this will not be a long journey.’

After everything was made secure, Khazad climbed up to what passed for the *Jove Star 7*’s observation deck to take a look at their departure. It wasn’t anything more than she’d expected – a single chamber, unfurnished, with three narrow realviewers showing a thin slice of the void. Terra was visible through one of them, initially as a curve of grey-white, then a gradually shrinking circle as the thrusters fired, diminishing steadily into nothingness. She watched it go. The chances of returning were not particularly high, she knew, but that wasn’t something she could feel too unhappy about. Merely moving again, getting out after some quarry rather than slinking around in the filth and the murk, that alone had lifted her mood.

A few large cargo vessels registered on the scopes as the system-hauler slid further up the orbital layers, but none of them sent a hail. One massive freighter drifted past them less than a kilometre away, entirely dark, as if its internal systems had failed. The press of void craft around them had a grim, almost sepulchral air to it, as if they had come together to expire while the world beneath them turned in on itself. Maybe the ships would start to turn around soon, in defiance of orders, knowing that failure to lift the embargo meant starvation for everyone. Or maybe they would remain stalwart, good Imperial citizens to the last, allowing their own crews to perish rather than risk the wrath of the Navy gun-lines.

Khazad felt her lip curl in disgust at that thought. Confronted with stasis, they couldn’t think, they couldn’t act, they just *froze*, praying to an Emperor whose active interventions in the material realm had always been open to conjecture at best. Perhaps this was a test they deserved to fail. Or perhaps it was something they needed in order to shake off the worst of their torpor. If the latter, then someone, or something, needed to be the one to trigger the change. Nothing fresh would come from inside the system, that was certain, and it wasn’t clear that anything on the outside could ever be accepted. That

left a miracle, the priests would say. The intervention of the divine. Some hope.

Still, Khazad watched for a long time, finding the gradual diminution of the grey disc of Terra, and its replacement by the infinite dark, something of a comfort. All that squalor, all that weakness, slowly wiped away, replaced by the frozen purity of the void.

She turned away once the screens were empty, only to see Revus standing at the chamber's far end. She hadn't heard him enter. Was that her getting sloppy, or him getting better? He looked awkward, as if he'd come up there for the same reason as her, found the place occupied, and been uncertain what to do next.

'Do not worry – I go now,' she told him, making to push past. 'Enjoy the view.'

'The interrogator's sleeping,' Revus told her, staying where he was. 'She needed the rest – I don't know how many days she's been awake.'

'That makes you in charge, eh?' Khazad chuckled. 'Throne help us.'

'You needed to know.'

Khazad hesitated. Revus' physical presence hadn't changed much – he was still just as stolid, rough-edged as ever. He was like Spinoza in that sense, turgid as the Imperium itself. Perhaps that was why they kept her around, despite all the aggravation – to give them the little spark of creativity that previously Crowl had taken care of.

'That is what you come to tell me,' she said. 'Or maybe to check that I am trusted still. After all that happened.'

'She trusts you. That's enough for me.' Revus glanced over at the real-viewers. 'You almost gave us Zijes.'

'Not quite. Not quite good enough.'

At that, Revus finally cracked a half-smile. 'Never are, though, are we? Never at perfection. Spent my whole life chasing it.'

Khazad thought about leaving again. She thought about leaving him up here on his own, so he could mumble whatever he wanted to at the stars. For some reason, though, she stayed where she was. The last time they had spoken, the words had been angry – all that was hard to conjure up now.

'Maybe you don't think like that,' Revus went on. 'But I'm getting older. I've seen Space Marines now… It shows you the limits of the game.'

'They have their place,' she said. 'Not suitable for every task.'

‘True. The Emperor has a destiny for all His children.’ That was the old Ministorum saying, the one they told infants over and over. ‘Do they teach that on Shoba?’

‘No. I never knew of an Emperor on Shoba. None of us did. It is – how you say it – feral world.’ She wanted to talk to him now, it seemed. Why was that? ‘We have cities, but all ruins. Do not know who built them. Always night, in those places. And there are ghosts, in the old stone. The dark cities, they are called. We have to go there, for food, for the old treasures we need to live, but we never stay.’

He was listening. Just like Crowl – he was interested.

‘And then, one night,’ she said, ‘they came for me. In their steel birds, down out of the skies. They take me to the sentinel moon, the one that we never knew was watching us all the time. The place where they make the Iron Shades – you know this. And also my kind, the killers. Because we had learned how to hunt in the ruins – silent, careful, fast – so we are valuable to them. Then, only then, I learn of the Emperor. And I remember what we saw in the cities. The eagles, the old eagles, made of stone, broken. And so His people must have made those cities, just like they made the sentinel moon, but a long time ago, and something changed for them.’

She looked away. Too long ago.

‘So we know it can all end. It can all fall apart. Something will linger, either dead or stronger. But the Emperor did not help those cities. So do not ask Him for that. And maybe think on this – why does He protect us, eh? You want to be strong, but always asking for Him to do something – to save you, to guide you, to lift you up. Maybe it is *us*, who protect Him. Maybe that is a better truth. More useful.’

Revus raised an eyebrow. ‘Careful. If I was recording this–’

‘You would not. I trust you. Anyway, I care not.’ She shrugged. ‘We go to Mars in this thing. The healer is right – we die there. Time to speak some truth, I think.’

‘Spinoza will find him. You care about that.’

‘I do. And maybe Crowl has some other task for us then. I care about that too. But this is not more than my old life, really. Another dark city. Take what we can, get out again. No thoughts, no words for what we do, just another day alive.’

Now it was Revus’ turn to look at her directly, as if examining her afresh.

She couldn’t tell from his expression whether he was disappointed or impressed with what he saw. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Not for me.’

‘What you mean?’

‘Not just alive. To be better. The best possible.’ Revus had never been articulate, and he struggled now. ‘Crowl never told me what he saw in there – the Palace. I didn’t get close enough to see for myself. But He suffers. I could sense that. The Church says the same thing, and they’re right. I can’t even… imagine. So it can’t be for no reason. It can’t be for no point. I don’t know what it is, I don’t know the deep reasons, but there must be something.’ He sighed. ‘I’m not a priest. But it’s more than just staying alive. It’s… repaying the debt. The only way I know how.’

‘By getting better.’

‘Every day. Out of respect.’

She’d always thought that was just his obsessive nature, the kind of thing the scholas hammered into their creations. To discover that there was something like a theology behind it… well, that was interesting.

Revus, though, looked embarrassed, like he’d just given something shameful away. He started to shuffle back the way he’d come, muttering something about needing to give the squads their orders.

‘I saw you,’ Khazad said. ‘In the hangar, in that fight. First time, since you ended up with Imperial Fists, eh?’ She didn’t smile easily. When she tried it, she felt pretty sure it came out crooked. ‘They taught you something. You were better. So, is working, maybe.’

‘Maybe?’

‘We fight again soon. Then I tell you for sure.’

He nodded brusquely, professionally, too slow, though, to hide his pleasure. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Worth all the effort, then.’

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Spinoza woke after six hours, pulled back up into consciousness by her chamber's alert-chime. For a terrible moment she had no idea where she was, who she was with, what she was doing. She reached, by instinct, for Argent, and only then recognised the narrow room she'd taken as her own, heard the dull grind of plasma drives, felt the creak and crack of a vessel in transit through the void.

Travelling through realspace was a very different sensation from traversing the warp. There was no heavy air of mental oppression thrumming under every surface, no low-level ache of psychic wrongness in every breath taken. The irritations were more mundane – poor grav-control, stale air, confinement to narrow spaces smelling of human sweat and the residue of a hundred different cargo consignments.

Jove Star 7. The ship Gorgias had selected – a system-hauler, just one of millions operating in the Sol System alone. Big enough to look after itself, small enough not to attract attention. It had been a good choice, with the fuel to take them to Mars, and beyond if need be. At the thought of the Red Planet, though, she felt a tremor of unease.

It would be suicide to try.

Erunion was almost certainly correct. Very few unsanctioned journeys were ever taken to that place. Just as the tech-priests stuck out amid wider Imperial society, so standard humans stuck out when surrounded by the servants of the Machine-God. The interactions between the two allied empires were always fraught, ripe to spill over in suspicion or misunderstanding, and an Inquisitorial rosette meant little outside the structures of the Imperium proper. Getting into a place like Skhallax was daunting enough; heading to the very heart of the Adeptus Mechanicus far more so.

And yet, that was where the trail led. Raskian, the Fabricator General, was the third High Lord implicated in Crowl's plot, and he had left Terra some time ago. The Golden Throne – the sacred object at the heart of all this secrecy – was in the care of the Mechanicus, and it was they who had most to lose if the rumours of its impending failure had any truth to them. Their rigidly controlled society made it more likely something as heretical as a xenos-created webway portal could be concealed, whereas Terra was so chaotic and ramshackle that keeping any kind of secret for long was nigh impossible. And then there was the material from Jarrod's hab, chiming with what Khazad had found, again making the case.

All in all, impossible to ignore. She kept telling herself that this mission was not about trying to get to the very bottom of what had been going on. The first stage was to find traces of Crowl's progress. If he had made the same judgement as her, then she would surely be able to find some clue to his whereabouts, alive or dead – it was as hard for him to remain incognito in that environment as it was for them. Only once that discovery had been made could she progress things further, delving into the truly impossible decisions that she had thus far postponed. Would she aid him? Would she reel him in? Would she serve his will, just as she had sworn to do when taking up her position at his side, or would she have to stand against him?

She drew in a deep breath, ran her hands through her hair, forced herself to her feet. She donned her armour, did what she could to clean the grime from her skin and make herself look the part. Then she left her chamber and made her way to the bridge.

On arrival, she took a good look at the place again. Two of her storm troopers stood guard. Another one, she knew, was patrolling the decks, probably alongside either Khazad or Revus, while the fourth took a rest

period. It would not be difficult to keep a tight lock on this ship – the crew were small in number, and had little power to rebel even if they had wanted to. The captain, an unkempt man named Jokra, was as pliant as a rotten weed. His deputy, a woman named Kles, had more spark to her, but was enough of a stickler for rules to recognise Inquisitorial authority.

They had, so it seemed, got away. The foetid mazes of Terra were a long way behind now. A ship this old and slow would take days to reach its destination, but that hardly mattered when everything else was becalmed and static. It might even do them all some good to have an enforced break – they could recover their strength a little, put in place a proper plan for when they arrived.

She looked at the storm trooper in command, Gereg. ‘All as it should be?’

‘Aye, interrogator,’ he replied smartly. ‘The captain is–’

‘Gainfully employed, I am sure,’ she replied. ‘I will summon him when I need him. Any signs of pursuit?’

‘None. We maintain scans.’

‘Good.’

After that, she headed back down through the decks of the ship’s inhabited sections. It didn’t take her long to traverse the bulk of it – the vast majority of a ship like this was given over to its cargo holds, and the chambers used by the crew were tiny in comparison. She’d seen better-kept vessels, but many worse. The work on a craft like this would be hard, in all likelihood, but not entirely crushing, at least for the non-servitors.

As she studied the layout of the decks, observed the ongoing activities of the crew, it struck her how many millions – maybe billions – of such vessels went about their business all across the Imperium, quietly, without fuss or notice, regular as chrono-operation. The crew here were better off than most of those who huddled in the spires of Terra, and far luckier than those who served in the major warzones. Crowl would have liked them, she thought. He would have seen them as the ones he was charged with protecting, the ones that kept things going, the ones that made things work. No High Lords here, he’d have told her. No grand conspiracies, no religious pogroms. Just an old ship, rattling and creaking as it ferried supplies around. ‘Don’t scorn it,’ she could almost hear him telling her. ‘They keep the hab-spires from starving. They keep the machine from seizing up.’

After an hour or so of observation, she went back to the chamber she’d

requisitioned for her private study. As she entered, Gorgias floated up out of the gloom, his oculus an inquisitive blue. The skull was the only guardian she needed for Albujar's materials – the majority of Jokra's people were terrified of him, even though they had a couple of non-verbal servo-skulls of their own in service.

'Yes-yes,' Gorgias said, eagerly. '*Molto labore*. Now, *immediatemente*.'

Spinoza smiled, flicking on the chamber's lumens. 'Very well. We have little else to occupy us.'

She sat at the long metal table, cleared of its old contents and now strewn with parchment from Albujar and physical copies of transcripts prepared by Erunion. Her eyes were drawn back to where she had left things after the last session.

The ancient forge. The home of the makers. The lesser sister. The bloodied crone.

Those had been Albujar's interpretations. She compared them against the original runes, traced out by Jarrod, together with the basic lexicons she'd taken from Courvain's archives.

'The bloodied crone,' she murmured, linking the Gothic characters to the xenos patterns. 'Blood for red, I suppose.'

'Affirmativo.'

'But "crone"?'

'Aye, yes-yes,' Gorgias chattered. '*Xenos degeneratus* term for planet-world-moon. Crone, maiden. *Disgustio*.'

That was the problem – everything was a metaphor, figurative. The bloodied crone. The red planet. But something nagged at her about that. Something still felt not quite right.

She rubbed at her eyes, already feeling the runes starting to swim across her vision. Once she focused again, her gaze landed on the passage from Courvain – *The aeldari do not draw a clean distinction, I judge, between the biological and the technological*. Then she looked over at Albujar's notes again. *The home of the makers*. *The ancient forge.*

She felt a sudden twinge of worry, as if something she had convinced herself of had just become uncertain, and looked up at Gorgias. The skull had come to hover over her shoulder, and she found herself staring right into his bony face. For the first time, she saw the deep crack in the cheekbone. And lodged deep in the crack, she caught sight of something

else. Something dark and glittering.

How had she missed that before? Then again, everything had been so rushed. ‘Did you get your damage seen to, as I commanded?’ she asked.

Gorgias bobbed upward, his oculus flickering. ‘*Negativa*, no-no,’ he stammered, sounding embarrassed. ‘*Nulla tiempo*, no time.’

She stood up, suddenly alarmed. ‘Come here,’ she said.

Gorgias’ oculus went red, and he swerved on his grav-plate.

‘Come here,’ Spinoza ordered, and the skull finally slunk in close. She reached out to grab his cracked cheekbone, turning Gorgias so that the wound was angled towards the lumen-glow. She activated the micro-scanner in her armour’s collar, and peered in close.

Throne, it was artful. If she hadn’t used such devices herself in the past, she would never have even known what to look for. Just a piece of shrapnel, buried deep as the result of a desperate firefight. Except that it wasn’t shrapnel. It was a tiny, tiny device, one designed to look like a sliver of stray metal from a bullet-casing, impervious to all but the most diligent scans. Erunion might have picked it up if he’d been given the chance, but Courvain’s standard systems wouldn’t.

Spinoza released Gorgias and put in an urgent call to Revus. ‘All personnel to bridge. We have a problem.’

Then she turned on the skull, her eyes flashing with fury. ‘It was a *command*,’ she growled, even as she calculated how long they might have.

Gorgias’ featureless visage somehow managed to look distraught and perplexed at the same time. ‘*Incognita! No comprehendo!* What is *problema?*’

She ignored the bluster, strode over to one of the crates they had brought over from the cargo-mule. She pulled out a handheld lascutter, activated the beam, and beckoned Gorgias over.

‘You are,’ she said, her voice as cold as it was during the actions that she performed in the interrogation chambers. ‘It cannot be allowed to continue.’

By the time she got back to the bridge, Revus, Khazad and the squad were waiting. The *Jove Star 7*’s crew stared at them all, startled by the sudden change in their demeanour.

‘A tracker,’ Spinoza said. ‘Lodged in the skull.’

‘Active?’ Revus asked.

‘Very much so.’

‘Where is skull?’ Khazad asked.

Spinoza shot her a grim look. ‘Dealt with,’ she said. ‘It must have been planted during the fight at Leorxes. They’ve known where we are for some time.’ She turned to the member of Jokra’s crew manning the long-range augurs. ‘Repeat your scans. Longest range you can muster, full power. Something is out there.’

The operator fumbled the controls, then managed to boost the power and tried again. Phosphor trails slunk down the surface of his picter lenses, initially picking up nothing.

Revus went down to the console, pushed the operator aside and adjusted the settings. He ran three more boosted sweeps, expertly extracting every last dram of sensitivity from the low-grade arrays. Eventually, he looked up at Spinoza.

‘Faint sensor-shadow detected,’ he said. ‘Matching our speed and trajectory, just on the edge of scan range. Has been there for some time, I think.’

Spinoza shook her head. Too much to hope that the creator of the tracker had somehow been unable to maintain a pursuit. ‘Damn him,’ she said. ‘Too persistent. What’s our sector location?’

‘Almost out of Terran voidspace,’ reported one of Jokra’s crew. ‘Still days away from an entry-run for Mars.’

‘Any other ships within range?’

‘None.’

Khazad’s hand slipped to the hilt of her blade. ‘Then we must engage.’

Spinoza smiled thinly. ‘We got lucky last time. He would not have come after us again without ensuring he had the force to achieve his aim.’ She clenched her right fist tightly – the only external sign of the deep frustration she felt. ‘We cannot outrun them. We cannot outgun them. Throne only knows why he hasn’t moved already.’

‘There must be something,’ Khazad said.

‘Agreed,’ said Spinoza, bleakly. ‘Throw ourselves upon his mercy.’

Khazad laughed out loud. Revus merely raised an eyebrow.

‘He is ambitious,’ said Spinoza, deadly serious. ‘He wishes to make a name for himself. If he knew what we were engaged with, that should mean more to him than returning us to Terra. He must be persuaded to join us.’

No one looked convinced by that.

‘I see little else worth attempting,’ Spinoza said. ‘He is a fellow member of the ordos. Bringing him into confidence is the only instrument we have at our disposal.’

‘It destroys everything,’ Khazad said vehemently.

‘Not everything,’ said Spinoza. ‘I went back to the sources. I have doubts, things that need clarification. He could help us, were we to persuade him of the urgency.’

‘He will not help us,’ said Revus. ‘He will fulfil his orders.’

‘Possibly,’ said Spinoza. ‘But unless someone can give me a way to escape him or overpower him, this seems to me the only chance we have. Suggestions?’

Silence fell across the bridge.

‘Very well,’ said Spinoza, after a decent interval had passed. ‘Listen carefully – here is what we are going to do.’

The gun-cutter *Acheros* powered smoothly through the void, ramping up its engines just a single notch in order to close on the system-hauler. It was a blue-black hunk of adamantium, barely reflective, its spear-sharp prow broken up with the muzzles of energy weapons. As soon as the *Jove Star 7* had started to slow, to come about, it had moved in, taking its time, flooding the void-volume with augur readings, just in case this was another elaborate ruse.

Nothing else turned up. Like a shark of the deep, the gun-cutter closed into weapons range, then sent out the hails to disarm. Those were returned immediately, signalling full compliance. Zijes ordered a single firing of the main beam-cannons, aimed aft, just to put a marker down, then left the cutter’s bridge and entered the transit shuttle. Flanked by void-fighter escorts, the shuttle crossed the narrow gap between ships, entered the receiving hangar, and powered down. The inquisitor and thirty of his troops disembarked. Mindful of the last encounter, these were armed to the teeth, carrying hellguns, electro-blades and plasma pistols, and were decked out in full boarding armour with blast shielding and slit-visored helms.

They were met by members of the hauler’s crew, who offered to escort them up to the bridge. No signs of resistance were offered. Zijes travelled with the bulk of his escort, sending a single squad to sweep the remaining

decks. The *Acheros* kept its formidable arsenal targeted at its counterpart's engines the whole time.

By the time Zijes made it up to the cramped bridge-space, his quarry was waiting for him – Interrogator Spinoza, her assassin, her captain of storm troopers, and four other warriors. All were armoured, none carried their weapons ready to use. The remainder of the hauler's bridge crew got on with their tasks, studiously attempting not to look up from their glowing console-lenses.

Zijes flickered a battle-sign command to Channa, his guard-captain, and his own troops fanned out watchfully, covering every angle. Fresh sensor-sweeps were run, comms-jammers established. All the while Spinoza waited patiently, saying nothing.

Zijes removed his helm, locking it to the armour at his waist.

'Running was foolish,' he said coldly. 'You must have known I would come after you.'

Spinoza nodded. 'As I told you before, you do not understand the importance of what we are doing here.'

Zijes looked down at the deck between them. The remains of a servo-skull lay in pieces, its internal machinery cracked open and its residual organic matter slowly drying out. 'I'm surprised you didn't check your equipment more carefully.'

'An omission. We had other concerns at the time.'

Zijes gave a dismissive shrug. 'Arx won't be impressed.' He gestured to Channa again. 'All over now, though. You will come with me.'

Spinoza didn't move. 'Listen. Just for a moment. I offer no resistance, but you need to realise what is going on here.'

'No, interrogator. Things are moving fast on Terra – we're getting signals concerning matters you would not believe. You're coming back.'

'It matters not,' Spinoza said. 'This business with the Mountain, with the old Master. It is a sideshow, just a way to shut down inconvenient truths. The real problem goes deeper. The Throne. The Throne itself. Hostile elements have been conspiring–'

'Enough,' said Zijes wearily. 'We'll have time on the journey to go over all of this. For now, your investigations are over.'

'You could be a part of it, if you chose to,' Spinoza said, undeterred. 'Once I explain the full scope, becoming involved would give you far greater

prestige than anything you can win from the Representative.’

Zijes grinned. ‘That’s really why you think I took this on. Prestige.’

‘We all care about it. Even Crowl did, though he pretended not to.’ Spinoza’s steady gaze never wavered. ‘But it counts for more. This is a credible threat. One that has already claimed the lives of two inquisitors and a High Lord of the Imperium, and unless halted it will claim many more. I have all the materials here ready for inspection. I will make them all available to you, and you can see for yourself what we have been doing. We have made progress, we believe, but much is still uncertain.’ She even offered something close to a smile. ‘Since I cannot outrun you, and apparently cannot outwit you, I may as well make the offer. Join us. Become involved, inquisitor, in something truly worthy of your talents.’

Zijes hesitated. He glanced over at Channa, who was waiting for his command. Then he looked at Khazad, whose surly face gave nothing away, and then at Revus, who was similarly impossible to read. ‘What materials?’ he asked.

‘Two transit crates, all catalogued and referenced, ready in my chambers. Everything we know, everything we suspect. All the proof you could ever need, all here, ready for inspection. The only thing I ask is that you do not confiscate them, but study them here in my presence – I can explain what we have deciphered so far.’

For a moment longer, he didn’t move. He stared at her, his eyes narrowing.

Then the shimmer of a half-smile played across his own sharp features.

‘A fair offer,’ he said, motioning to Channa to bring out the shackles. ‘But not enough. You’ll be taken to my ship, along with your retinue and these… materials. Once Arx is finished with you, if she ever is, you can have them back.’ He turned on his heel as his troops got to work. ‘There was nowhere to run, interrogator. We are sealed in now, just as if the entire Imperium no longer existed. You’re coming back to Terra. Strange, to me, that you thought you could ever leave.’

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Once the cargo – living and otherwise – had been transferred, the *Acheros* turned on its axis and prepared for the trip home. The *Jove Star 7* was left to its own devices. Neither Spinoza nor Zijes asked what Jokra planned to do now – he might try to run for Jupiter, if he had the supplies for it, or slink back into Terran orbit instead. Either way, his part in this was now over, something he was no doubt greatly relieved about.

Zijes took no chances with his new prisoners, though he was courteous enough during the transfer and his troops did not engage in any opportunistic brutality to settle the scores from Leorxes. Spinoza, Khazad, Revus and the storm troopers were disarmed, their weapons placed in the *Acheros*' armoury. The evidence crates were scanned for routine threats, then loaded onto the shuttle and placed in the gun-cutter's cargo hold. Once the journey began, all of them were kept in separate chambers – the *Acheros* was an inquisitor's vessel, and so had plenty of those to go around. The engines were steadily cranked up to median speed, meaning that they would be re-entering Terran voidspace the following standard day.

Spinoza lay back on her cot in the near-bare chamber, placed her hands together, and tried to relax. Nothing could be done now, save to mentally

examine and re-examine the work she had done right up until the discovery of Gorgias' implant. Things could have been worse – Zijes' approach could have been entirely undetected, leaving them no time to prepare at all. As it was, she had at least had time to discuss her findings with Revus and Khazad, both of whom had been able to offer opinions on what she proposed. Neither had been certain enough to veto any course of action. That felt appropriate – for so long now they had been relying on hunches and half-glimpsed truths, clutching at anything that could possibly lead them to where they needed to be.

Options were very limited now. Being taken to Terra was out of the-question, of course – once back on that world, any hope of being able to continue the quest was erased. Preventing that happening in the current reduced circumstances would not be easy, for even if she managed to divert the gun-cutter, there was still the matter of persuasion to attend to. Sooner or later, Zijes would have to be brought on side, and the longer this went on, the harder that would become.

For the time being, she used the long passage of time to pray. She hadn't done so for some time, and surprised herself at how hard it was to fall back into the rhythms of the words. She had known those words from childhood, and they had always been a comfort to her. From her first real memories of rain-lashed Astranta, all the way through her training, she had always been able to lean on them. Now even that was being eroded, worn away by what she had seen, what she had done. Had Crowl's drip-feed of cynicism finally got to her? Or was she, too, a victim of the xenos poison, creeping through her veins just as it had done with her master?

It was commonplace in the Inquisition to say that the labour changed the labourer. The Puritan leaving the schola became the Radical. The Radical fresh on her first mission turned into the Puritan. Faced with contradiction piled on contradiction, only the most steadfast minds of all never wavered even a little. Those were the ones destined either to become lords of the ordos or the worst criminals raving in the dungeons – the ones who couldn't change their minds, with their thoughts set in amber from the first day of instruction. The rest were left flailing, trying to construct some kind of coherent philosophy from the mass of falsity and deception they encountered at every waking hour.

Which kind would she be? Would she remain an Amalathian at heart? If

she were to stay that way, things would have to change. Answers would have to come. Maybe it would be better to keep a distance from the heart of things, as so many of her counterparts did. Perhaps the reason so many inquisitors conducted their affairs away from Terra was not, as she had always assumed, because the danger was greater there, but because they could shield themselves from the harder worry – that it was *all* rotten, that there was no salvation in any form, and that all their fancy doctrines were just rarefied versions of the same self-preservation stories the most uneducated serf told themselves.

Blessed is the mind, and all that. No wonder that was the first mantra to trip from their lips in the chapels.

Too small to doubt.

She was stung from her thoughts by the chime at her door. She felt a tremor of unease, wondering if she had lost track of time completely, and checked the chrono. Still on target – just. She pulled herself up from the cot and swung her legs over the thin blanket, seated on the edge.

The outer door creaked open, and Zijes came through the hatch. He was out of his armour, clad in a dark-grey tunic and bodyglove. Somehow that made him look more dangerous than before. Spinoza had the instinctive feeling that the battlefield was not his preferred location, and that the more poisonous realm of Terra's gilded heights was where he felt most at home.

'So,' he said, reaching out for the chamber's lone metal chair, pulling it round and sitting on it. 'We could just ignore each other, or we could speak like civilised people. What do you prefer?'

'That depends,' Spinoza replied. 'On what you are prepared to listen to.'

'Your great and secret project.'

'You've taken a look at the transit crates?'

'You went to so much trouble to insinuate there was something of value in them that I decided to ignore them. I'm more interested in some of your other decisions. Like, for example, why an unarmed hauler was being taken on a direct course towards the Red Planet.'

'I need to find Crowl.'

'If he went there, without plenty of heavy support, then he's already dead.'

'Possibly. Though I now think I might have been mistaken. The wrong target, I mean, though the principle was sound.'

Zijes gave an irritated sigh. 'Speak plainly, or there's little point in having

this conversation.’

So Spinoza did. She told him, as concisely as she could, about the whole thing – the xenos uncovered on Terra, the plot to use that xenos to restore the Throne, the delegation spoken of by Franck, the suspected webway gate uncovered first by Crowl, and now by them. Zijes listened to it all. He gave nothing away the whole time, just sat there, legs crossed, taking in every detail, just as he’d been trained to.

‘You know, I’d normally discount all of that,’ he said when she’d finished. ‘You hear plenty of conspiracies, year on year. None of them ever come to pass – the Imperium remains the same, its demise postponed for another night, its triumph deferred for another day. But, see, right now, something very strange is going on. You wouldn’t have got wind of it, stuck on that hauler as you were, but while we were still in augur range of Terra we picked up some odd transmissions. Truth be told, that was the only reason we held off as long as we did – my signals-master couldn’t believe what we were getting.’ He folded his arms. ‘Troop movements. *Massive* troop movements. And Navy, too – anything stationed at the Mandeville zones, pulled back at speed. Adeptus Astartes involved. Maybe even greater powers – the ones we don’t always believe really exist – all racing to respond to… something.’

‘Where?’

‘Unclear. If we hadn’t been so far out, we might have been caught up in it ourselves. It may be that heading home again is immensely stupid, but then this is not something to ignore.’

Spinoza thought on that. ‘This supersedes your orders from Arx.’

‘In what way? I’ll still hand you over.’

‘But you can see that things are changing.’

‘*Some* things are changing. Nothing linked to your mission.’

She glanced at her chrono again. The margins were fine, and she had only ever been working on estimates. ‘We will be coming into range of Luna soon,’ she said.

‘What of it?’

‘You said the destination was unclear. I would place a wager – were I inclined to place wagers – that your signals were from Luna.’

‘Maybe so. We’ll never find out.’

‘I disagree. I think we will find out very soon.’

Zijes looked at her quizzically. ‘What do you–’

The alert klaxons started to blare.

‘Because you will take me there,’ Spinoza said. ‘That, or lose this ship.’

Gorgias’ oculus switched on.

It took a while for anything like awareness to return. His visual display jumped, skidded, then flickered into something like its usual blurred state. He panicked, trying to activate his grav-plate, and only succeeding in smacking hard into something solid.

Then his recent-memory coils warmed up, and his higher cognitive function array made all the right connections. He remembered how it had been.

The woman, the interrogator, the one his apprentice had seemed to like, she had been speaking to him. She had been angry. Very angry. He couldn’t remember why, but it had been unnerving. He played himself the audex-log of the encounter, just to reassure himself it was a Real event, not one of the many False ones.

Yes, that was it. She was angry because of something that he hadn’t done. Something that had endangered the others. And now she was telling him things, one after the other, speaking very fast. He forced himself to put those things in order, just as his cognitive adjutant fully activated.

‘I am going to fully depower you,’ she had said. ‘Total shutdown, including your reserve unit. Otherwise you will be detected when they scan the crates – you understand this?’

He remembered he had responded.

>> Affirmative. That would appear to be the most prudent course of action.

As usual, the audex of the output got all jumbled up.

‘*Affirmativo!* Yes-yes, *optima*-best *agenda prudens*.’

‘You will awaken once the ship reaches a certain cartographic reference,’ she had said. ‘I have inserted a wafer with the command engrams. It may take a few moments to recover your equilibrium, but you must act swiftly. Do you understand?’

>> Affirmative. Engrams encoded for rapid retrieval.

‘Yes-yes! *Ordines suscepit* very good *en toto*.’

Then she had gripped him on either side of his head, something that he

found uncomfortable.

‘You can put this right, skull,’ she said. ‘Do not disappoint me.’

And that brought him up into the present. Gorgias rose up again, more gingerly this time, until his oculus was in line with the lock-unit. He extended a needle from his gun-mounting and quickly clicked the bolts open. The transit crate lid cracked upward, then hissed higher as the pistons activated. Once the gap was wide enough, Gorgias rose up through it, going as quietly and carefully as he could.

The chamber he emerged into was dark and cold. It had gravity, but the atmosphere was stale, indicating it was fully sealed. Another transit crate was placed next to his, and other bulky items were piled up beyond that. He cycled up his noctis-gain, giving him a better view of the interior, and scanned for any unseen hostiles within. Finding none, he swayed out of the crate entirely and boosted up towards the chamber’s exit hatch.

The interrogator had told him where he’d be put. She knew plenty about the layout of the inquisitor’s ship – a standard configuration, Gorgias guessed – and had given him clear direction on how to reach his location. It wasn’t far. The cargo hold was close to the engine level, and the main promethium reservoirs were just below that. If he went swiftly, this would all be over in moments.

He withdrew his needle-gun and rotated to a lascutter. He used that to blow the outer hatch clear, then butted the door panel to open it fully. After that he was jinking and scuttling along the corridors, feeling the thrum of the engines all around him, the clang and boom of machinery working, the muffled chatter of human voices from some way above.

He reached the end of a corridor and pivoted smartly before sinking down through an atmosphere-processor vent. Then it was down two levels, dropping like a stone, the volume of the huge plasma drives booming through his auditory intakes.

When he emerged, he was right in front of them – a series of giant tanks that ran off into the darkness, double-hulled and heavy-plated. It would be hard work to do what the interrogator had ordered. He’d have to drill in from here, then swim his way through the heavy fuel-oil as it cascaded out of the breach and clamp to the far side, then drill again until he penetrated the outer casing-layer and generated a hull-breach. He’d have to shut down most of his intakes, accept that his oculus would be smeared into

uselessness, be very careful not to have his motive units so fouled that he lost the ability to move, and ignore the alert klaxons that would kick off as soon as the tanks were compromised.

If he'd had lungs, he would have taken a deep breath. As it was, Gorgias merely activated the lascutter and watched as the sparks flew in the gloom.

Time to make amends.

Zijes raced for the chamber exit as soon as the alarms kicked off. He slammed the door behind him, and Spinoza heard the locks slide fast.

She remained where she was. The klaxons carried on shrieking, and she saw the strobe of alert-lumens under the crack of her chamber door. Heavy footfalls clattered down the corridor outside more than once, and she heard frantic voices raised. The note of the ship's engines changed, switching from a steady rhythmic grind to a juddering staccato.

Gradually, order was restored. The klaxons ceased, the lighting returned to normal. Orders were shouted, more personnel ran down the corridor, this time going the other way, then nothing.

Spinoza waited. It took a long time before anything else happened. The engine-note didn't change, but carried on as if the machinery were being slowly strangled. Nearly an hour passed, and no one came for her.

But he came back in the end. He had to. There was always the chance that he'd be so angry he'd kill her, but that would have been hard to explain to Arx, so it had felt like a risk worth running.

He looked surprisingly calm. Maybe even slightly impressed.

'You'd dismantled the skull,' he said.

'Not the one you tracked. One of the hauler's non-sentients.'

He nodded. 'And the original…'

'Was in the transit crate. I advised you to take a look.'

He smiled wryly. 'So you did.' He took a seat opposite her, just as before. 'The skull didn't rupture the full set of tanks.'

'It was not ordered to.'

'So I guessed. We have enough fuel to get us into orbit around Luna. But not Terra. Not without arranging a rendezvous with another ship.'

'You could do that.'

'I could. It would take time, and in the current madness, maybe a transmission wouldn't even make it. Port Luna, on the other hand, is within

reach. Easy reach.’

‘So that would seem to solve the problem.’

Zijes placed his hands together, fingers up, rested his chin on them. ‘Why Luna? Why now?’

‘A guess. Jarrod believed a webway portal was the route used by Franck’s delegation. If Crowl were able to reach it too, then it could not have been via the warp, so if it existed at all then it must be in-system. Mars was the first choice, because we believed Raskian had gone there, but that was only based on chatter from tech-priests, and they were most likely guessing too. Albujar’s transcriptions appeared to confirm it, and prompted us to move. You could have read those notes, had you been inclined. The home of the makers. The ancient forge. It sounded right.’

Zijes listened. He listened more carefully than she’d expected. That made her uneasy, but there was no choice now – nothing but full disclosure.

‘But “makers”, for the xenos, are not technicians,’ she said. ‘Not engineers. They draw no distinction between biological growth and manipulation of inert matter. It could have been the home of any kind of craft. Biological science. Gene-craft. The manuscripts Jarrod copied were ancient, made a long time ago. Maybe they referred to the old looms of Luna, the place where legend says the Astartes were created.’

‘Nothing more than that?’

‘It fits with the other descriptions. The bloodied crone. “Crone” stands for a satellite as much as it does a planet. “Bloodied” could stand for red, as I supposed, or merely “ravaged”, as in a realm destroyed by another, then made to serve its requirements. And “the lesser sister”. Easy to read as the smaller of the two world-empires, but just as possibly Terra’s satellite, itself once the home of a distinct human realm. If Jarrod’s manuscripts were correct, a portal could have existed on Luna for a long time, maybe forgotten, maybe sealed. Perhaps the xenos knew how to reopen it. If so, that would be worth taking a look at.’

Zijes pondered that. He pressed his chin harder into his fingertips, musing on what she had said. Then his eyes moved up to meet hers.

‘If I killed you here, now,’ he said, ‘I think Arx would understand. She wouldn’t like it, but she’d agree you gave me reason. I’ve thought about it. I’ve thought about killing your whole retinue, one by one, in front of you. I got close to giving the order – you should know that.’

Spinoza said nothing. She had little doubt he was capable of it.

‘But then, because of what you did here, we had to scan ahead to Luna, just in case our only option was to put into orbit there and make repairs. It’s as you say. Something bad has happened. Catastrophic. The action’s over now, apparently, but huge forces are still milling around. What’s going on? No idea. Anything useful sounding is in military cipher, which tells me powerful people are trying to keep a lid on things. We pulled out a location, but not much more.’

‘I have a harmonic profile. Something you could use to verify whether–’

‘And what good would that do you?’ Zijes asked impatiently. ‘Suppose you’re right. A webway gate has somehow been activated on Luna’s surface. If true, then it’s no longer a secret. An army – *lots* of armies – have been mobilised towards it. There’s been fighting. There is no chance of you reaching it, or even approaching it undetected.’

‘A lamentable lack of ambition, inquisitor.’

‘Just the facts, interrogator.’

Spinoza tried to recall how Crowl would have done it, then. No histrionics, no threats – just laying out the options, making the case as clearly as he could.

‘Listen,’ she said calmly, firmly. ‘We cannot avoid Luna now. That is my doing, I grant you, but it cannot be changed. If nothing else, you can see the truth of what I have been telling you. You can see that something has been set in motion, something that is changing everything. It is not pride that compels us to be a part of this, inquisitor, but duty. We swore to protect the Imperium, and it is being undermined beneath our noses. Do you think Arx is currently interested in anything other than the crisis we can see unfolding here? Do you believe her inquest is anything other than a distraction at this point? We must be nimbler than that. We must be able to react as the events around us change. Crowl was ahead of the game, but we are catching up fast. Take us there. Let us see with our own eyes what we both suspect has happened. The decision is yours, you are in command, and if you choose to walk away after that, then I can hardly prevent you. But not to even *look*…’ She shook her head. ‘I do not believe you can countenance that.’

Zijes thought. He thought for a long time. The silence, after a while, became uncomfortable, but Spinoza knew better than to break it.

Eventually, he stood again, pushing his chair back against the wall.

‘You were wasted with that old man,’ he said, reaching to activate the door release. ‘Make yourself ready, prepare what you need. Prove yourself useful down there, and we might even talk about a transfer of service.’

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was no chance of coming in close. That remained true even though the voidspace above Luna's surface was not especially crowded, even across the colossal stages of Port Luna, indicating that Zijes had been right and the action had moved on. If the Imperium was good at anything, it was good at suppressing information and clamping down on inconvenient truths, and so as the *Acheros* skimmed into high orbit, the comms traffic was fairly routine – complaints about the Terran embargo, pleas for landing slots, concerns about spoiling cargo. For all that, the levels of orbital security were high, with atmospheric transports flitting everywhere and Navy monitors holding geostationary positions over all the main conurbations.

Zijes showed her some of the few high-level comms bursts his analysts had succeeded in cracking. The content was fragmentary and still hard to interpret.

'*Did you lay eyes on him yourself? Any vid-footage? Because I have injunctions from the Ministorum ordering an imminent purge unless we can prove this isn't a hoax of galactic proportions, and right now I–*'

'*I still do not believe it. I cannot believe it. The madness is everywhere*

now, and this is just another part of it. I have made requests for immediate Inquisitorial investigation, with no reply. I may have to take matters into my own hands, and begin to root out those behind such foul–'

'Adeptus Astartes. Yes, you heard me correctly. In numbers. Many Chapters. They can't all have come from Terra. Throne! I never thought I'd see it. Everything they say is true. You hear me? It is true. This is a new–'

'What do you make of it?' Spinoza had asked.

'No idea,' Zijes had replied. 'The focus has moved back to Terra now. Massed ship movements, all coordinated. It takes some of the heat out of things here, but nerves are still frayed. They're talking as if…'

'As if?'

'Never mind. Some excitable souls down there. Taking comfort in their imaginations, no doubt.'

They planned their approach carefully. The locus of the remaining clean-up activity on Luna was focused on the Mare Tempestus, a vast area of wasteland far to the north-east of the settled zones. As far as the scans could determine, that landscape was entirely desolate, a waste of toxic dust and craters broken only by the carcasses of scrapped voidships left to be gnawed over by tech-scavengers. Filtered augur readings of the restricted zone showed a heavy Mechanicus presence – several giant atmospheric barges hovering over a cleared site, rapidly constructed perimeter walls, temporary structures bristling with activity. Skitarii seemed to be everywhere, crawling like insects across the skeletal bulk of half-built defensive towers. Right at the centre of the complex was a tall structure entirely covered with heavy translucent sheeting hung from a makeshift scaffold, though the poor scan-resolution prevented any close investigation of what lay within.

Like all Inquisitorial ships of its class, the *Acheros* had bafflers and stealth countermeasures that enabled it to slip through most standard detector-aegis screens. The gun-cutter dropped quietly down through the orbital zones, staying several hundred kilometres clear of the Mechanicus compound, until it took up a stationary position at low anchor. Landers were prepared, the exploratory party mustered.

The atmosphere in the arming rooms was strange. Zijes reassembled the same boarding party as before – led by Channa, two squads of ten, all in the same heavy armour they had donned on the *Jove Star 7*. Spinoza was

reunited with Revus, Khazad and her own storm troopers, who looked somewhat slimmed down next to their bulkier counterparts. Zijes, somewhat to her surprise, had imposed no real onerous conditions on the partnership, and allowed them to take up their own weapons again without restriction. That might have been because he trusted her. More likely, it was because enforcing control on the surface would have been difficult. For the moment at least, their goals were the same – to scope out the phenomenon, assess whether further intervention could be made. It was afterwards that things were likely to get difficult – Zijes would only wish to push on if he could see some advantage in doing so, and it wasn't clear yet what that would be.

Khazad was, to Spinoza's surprise, the most accommodating of the new arrangement, perhaps because she had changed retinues so frequently that another shift came as little surprise. Revus was more resistant.

'He was hunting us,' he said, a touch of reproach in his steady voice.

'He was,' Spinoza told him calmly, arming up. 'And now he is not. For the time being.'

Gorgias was the last of the squad to reappear, still blackened from his promethium bath despite extensive attempts by Hosh to clean him up. He looked a little steadier on his grav-plate than he had been, and his oculus shone a clear blue. Removing the tracker had seemingly had more than one benefit.

'Feeling yourself?' Spinoza asked.

'*Affirmativo.* Yes-yes. *Commencavit* operations *rapido.*'

Zijes laid down the parameters once they had all assembled in the lander hangars. Four drop-ships waited over descent trapdoors, prepped and armed, with the servitors and flight crew already making their way back to the observation deck. The vaulted space boomed with the throaty grind of engines cycling up.

'We'll come down here,' Zijes told them, gesturing to a glittering cartolith projected in front of them. 'Far into the Lunar wastes, out of range – I hope – of fixed detectors. We'll take ground transports on this heading, ditch them here. The compound approaches are still crawling with operatives. That actually helps, in that it gives us some cover from heat-source augur-sweeps, but we'll still have to go carefully. No shooting unless we have to. We get in, we take readings, then I'll make the judgement.' He

looked at Spinoza. ‘Understood?’

‘Perfectly,’ she replied.

‘Good. Emperor be with you.’

They boarded the drop-ships. Spinoza’s squad remained together, but was joined by four of Zijes’ troops, who had no doubt been given orders to keep an eye on them. The hatches were sealed, interior restraints buckled up and exterior chain-ties unravelled. Interior lumens cut out, and warning chimes sounded from outside the hull as the hangar depressurised. Spinoza leaned back against the hold’s metal wall, keeping her body relaxed and committing the planned route to memory. Argent lay just beside her in the weapons rack, and it felt good to have it back. More than that, it felt good to be making the running at last – not hunting for scraps of testimony, not fleeing from the attentions of predators, but making a move of her own. Not ideal circumstances, perhaps, but a move all the same.

The trapdoors opened, the cages cracked open, and the four landers dropped clean through the underside of the *Acheros*’ hull. The descent was rapid, and the noses of each lander dipped hard to reduce friction before boosting down into Luna’s artificial atmosphere. The hold had no external realviewers, but the roar of flame from outside was audible enough, making the structure judder and thrum.

It didn’t take long. Spinoza heard the retros roar briefly, then the manoeuvring thrusters kick in. The deck lurched for a moment before stabilising back to the horizontal, and then the drop-ship put down, smacking hard onto the Lunar landscape in a flurry of dust and blown-clear debris. The restraints unclipped, and they all made their way down the narrow hatches from the crew bay and into the vehicle holds at the lander’s rear. By the time Spinoza arrived, the rear descent ramp was already down, exposing Luna’s sharp black sky through a drifting gauze of grey dust. Two Atami E ground transports were waiting at the summit of the ramp, tied down and unpowered. Storm troopers activated the engines, unstrapped the restraints and bundled inside.

The six transports – two from each lander – moved down the ramps and formed up in single file. After final checks, they headed off into the dirty grey dunescape immediately ahead. Spinoza, content to leave the driving duties to Zijes’ people, wiped the armaglass viewer in front of her and took her first close look at Luna’s terrain.

It was astonishingly bleak – a wide, flat desolation of pale grey rock and dust under a velvet-black sky. No signs of habitation could be made out anywhere, save for some strange dark structures on the far eastern horizon that might just as well have been spindly, wind-worn rock formations. The gravity, temperature and atmospheric gas readings were close to Terran norms, though the sheer absence of buildings and people was strangely discomfiting – after so long being pressed up against nigh-infinite masses of humanity, to be suddenly transplanted into a world of emptiness was a jarring change.

She knew, of course, that Luna was heavily populated in places – by all accounts the main port was a truly colossal construction, positively seething with industry and activity. To have such vast tracts left undeveloped, and so close to the heart of Imperial power, felt odd. Then again, everything she knew about Luna told her it was an odd world, a place with almost as long a history of intrigue and betrayal as the mother planet itself, the rumoured home of ancient cults and tech-lords, ones whom the Emperor in His wisdom had chosen to subdue just as soon as the Throneworld itself had been united. Looking out at its barren splendour now, drinking in the isolation and the stark shadows, you could imagine that history well enough. You could imagine that if you scratched the dusty surface deeply enough you would uncover buried remnants of those forgotten empires, though it was more likely that techno-archeologists from a hundred different Imperial departmentos had already scoured every inch of terrain over the last few dozen centuries. If something as incendiary and heretical as a webway portal had been left here somehow, buried and lost but ready to be reactivated, then that alone was a scandal of apocalyptic proportions.

The transports powered on through the thick dust-dunes, rocking as they crested rises and skidded down the far slopes. An Atami was a robust thing, a standard armoured vehicle based on the larger Chimera platform. Not something you'd wish to take into a sustained firefight, perhaps, but solid and durable with decent amounts of power if you needed to effect a swift departure.

She glanced over at Revus, sitting on the opposite side of the crew bay. Impossible to read anything of his expression through the full-face helm.

'You have Erunion's harmonics?' she checked, just to be sure.

He nodded, saying nothing. Was he still dubious about all this? Probably.

The chance of at least finding out where Crowl had gone must have meant something to him. It had to.

They pressed on. The going became tougher, punctuated by sloughs of dust and steep defiles, but they were able to follow Zijes' route with no significant deviations. As they neared the dismount point, the rad-counters on her armour ticked up a little. It began to feel hotter – not much, but detectable, as if the afterglow of some huge and distant detonation still lingered amid the dry and dusty air.

Finally, the transports drew up next to one another and clustered at the base of a narrow valley. The troopers jumped down to the rocky terrain from the access hatches. Zijes and Channa checked the location and ran the usual scans. The rest of the troops pulled out their camo-cloaks and fastened the light-distorting fabric tight around their armour. They all knew the drill – exposed armour-edges were rubbed down with handfuls of Lunar dust, illumination was killed. The transports were depowered and covered up. Gorgias was already near invisible in the dark due to the lingering smears of oil over his surface, but even he had his oculus doused down to complete the effect.

'Vox-silence,' ordered Zijes before they set off. 'Battle-sign only from here on in.'

The squads moved out, climbing up the incline ahead, their boots sinking into the loose scree. At the top of the rise, a wide plain yawned off ahead, just as bleak and stark as every other vista they had travelled across. The horizon to the west was cluttered with the dark outlines of ships' carcasses – giant remnants of void-going craft sent to Luna for break-up and materials collection. Everything of value seemed to have been stripped from those visible, with only raw ironwork still intact – colossal ribcages of solid metal that soared high up into the blackness above. Throne alone knew why all that adamantium and plasteel wasn't worth recycling into new vessels, but for whatever reason the remains had been left to slowly moulder in Luna's caustic atmosphere, creating a surreal and silent world, hundreds of kilometres across, entirely composed of dead and decaying starships.

The terrain before them was fractured, marred by criss-crossed fissures and sinkholes. An acid-yellow glow was just visible in the north, barred by the black of the ships' bones. The storm troopers kept low to the ground,

slinking along in the dark and the dust. In those conditions the camo-cloaks conspired almost too well – if they strayed too far from one another they appeared to slip away entirely, sinking into the hard edges of rocky shadows.

It took an hour of steady progress before the first patrols were sighted. Zijes gave the sign, and every trooper immediately dropped to the ground. Spinoza shuffled carefully to the front of the group, lifting her head just a fraction and making use of her helm's magnocular zoom.

Skitarii, twelve-strong, all mounted on some kind of cyborg-equines. They were a long way off, tracing what looked like a fixed patrol route. Spinoza watched them move, their mounts bucking awkwardly across the broken landscape. They were in no hurry, and it took a long time for them to pass out of scan range.

Then the squads were up again, silently rising from the dust and creeping further across the plain. Zijes regularly checked their heading and position, but in truth he barely needed to – the yellow glow grew more pronounced, marking out their destination more clearly than any cartograph reference. Over on their left flank, the ship carcasses grew ever larger, now towering over them like empty cathedral naves. Up close, you could even start to make out hull classes – freighters, battleships, pleasure-barges, all jumbled together in decay.

More skitarii were sighted, their patrols steadily increasing in frequency as the glow grew larger. The storm troopers dropped out of view whenever they were seen, hugging the dirt and keeping their camo-cloaks pulled tight until the threat had passed. A wide range of esoteric Martian machinery was on display out there – hunter-killers limping in packs, more cyber-cavalry, a variety of mechanised walkers loping along on spindly legs and kicking up plumes of dust in their wake. They seemed to be roaming for larger threats, looping out wide from the main base in order to intercept massed formations, and didn't manage to lock on to the storm troopers' sensor-dampened profiles. Still, the encounter frequency was significant – the longer they all stayed out there, the more likely it was they would be picked up by something.

Zijes pressed on, keeping the pace up. Eventually they found themselves trudging up a long, shallow rise. The troopers strung out just before the summit, pressing their bodies flat against the dirt and squirming the rest of

the way to the crest. Once at the top, both Zijes and Spinoza activated their magnoculars, adjusted the range, and took a good look at what lay on the far side.

The compound came into view, just inside the zoom range of their armour systems. The intervening terrain was as open as ever – very little to hide behind or make use of. More Mechanicus units prowled across the open plain. The hovering grav-barges were clearly visible now, bathed in the harsh yellow glow of arc-lumens and hovering in static formation above the complex. They didn't seem to be doing very much – perhaps acting as command centres, or maybe the source of the construction material used for the buildings at ground level.

The defences were still incomplete. A few big gun towers had been constructed, but most elements were still shrouded in scaffolding and crowded with workers. The perimeter wall was mostly complete, but large sections composed of prefabricated blocks looked hastily dropped into place, potentially leaving weak points. Plentiful wreckage was piled up within and around the perimeter, most of it metallic, some of it looking like the shells of power armour or the shot-riddled panels of military vehicles. Craters pocked the interior – not Luna's natural terrain, but the results of explosives and mortar fire. The entire site was large – maybe five kilometres in diameter at its widest extent. Spinoza's rad-counters remained high, as did residual heat readings. The air shimmered strangely overhead, causing the starlight to waver.

She panned across to the structure at the compound's centre. It was the largest edifice present, about fifty metres high and more than twenty across. Every part of it was shrouded in translucent sheeting, held down by heavy cables and reinforced with metal bars. Flood-lumens bathed its flanks in sickly yellow light, tantalisingly revealing blurred dark patches within, where the internal structure pressed up against the taut sheeting. Spinoza spotted clusters of tech-priests congregating on platforms around it, all of them accompanied by skitarii escorts. Armoured walkers stood sentinel, and activity levels were very high – gangs of Mechanicus personnel were scuttling to and fro all the time, some hauling arcane equipment with them, others seemingly working on the protective structure or conveying orders between various clades. Sparks poured from lascutters and turbohammers, steadily wrapping the structure itself in ever more elaborate layers.

The thing itself, the object under wraps, seemed dormant. Inert. A collection of dark planes and surfaces that, if it had ever been active, was now burned out. Perhaps it had been destroyed or damaged in the fighting. Or perhaps it was merely slumbering, waiting for the right command.

Spinoza heard the faint clicks of Zijes' troops taking static picts. She saw Revus shuffle a little closer to deploy a full-spectrum auspex. She glanced at Khazad, who was silently observing, no doubt assessing how to get to it. Gorgias stayed low, hovering just above ground level, his oculus so dim that it was impossible to gauge his mood.

Eventually, Zijes had had enough. He flickered battle-sign to Channa, and then to her.

Complete all scans. Withdraw.

They did as they were bid, shuffling back down the incline and out of direct view of the compound. Then they began the long journey back the way they had come, pushing off into the wastes and maintaining a careful watch for more far-ranging sentries. Spinoza could almost feel the heat at her back as she walked, like the last rays of sun dropping under the horizon.

Zijes called a halt once they had reached the ground transports again. By then they had all been walking for hours without rest – most took the opportunity to sink to the ground and break out canteens. Channa and Revus conferred briefly, then exchanged scan-data over a hard-link to ensure both had a copy of the other's material. Gorgias popped up a little higher, swivelling around as if probing the shadows for hidden lurkers.

Zijes came up to her.

Too well guarded, he told her in silent hand signals.

There will be a way, she replied.

Not from here. We go back to the ship.

She was about to protest when Gorgias suddenly spun round. Something flickered across his auspex array, and he lurched as if struck.

'Intrusus!' he hissed, breaking vox-silence in his alarm.

Spinoza immediately fired off a targeted scan-burst and briefly picked up an active signal out in the dark, fifty metres off, before it disappeared again.

She broke into a sprint, whipping out her laspistol. Revus and Khazad raced along with her, weapons drawn, followed by the rest. She ran hard up a dust-clogged rise, crested it, skidded down the far side, almost losing her footing, before picking up speed across a hard patch of beaten rock.

Something had moved ahead of her – a slip of black against the dark, something that had been close enough to observe the transports. If it got back to one of the patrols, even close enough to send a clear transmission, then all would be lost – the skitarii would be on them like locusts.

The running storm troopers behind her spread out, casting the net wider, but she held her course, convinced she'd detected something straight ahead. Then she saw it again – a blurt across her helm's display, close now – and she almost fired blind to wing it, before trusting to her speed and getting in closer.

She could hear the grunts and panting of the storm troopers behind, and saw the squad-wide transmission from Zijes on her tactical display – *Bring it down*.

They almost did. A spread of las-shots at that range couldn't have failed to hit. It was only a sudden realisation, an immediate and gut-deep awareness that came from nowhere and surprised her with its unwarranted certainty, that prevented them.

'Stand down!' she voxed, doubling down on her speed, racing ahead and finally seeing it again in the night's murk – a scrawny shape, black-armoured, tarnished silver edges, a tatter of a worn cloak.

She leapt, both feet leaving the ground, sailing through the air before crashing to the scuttling figure, wrapping her arms around it and dragging it down into the dust. The two of them landed with a heavy thud, tumbling through the fine gravel and scree before sliding to a halt.

The man she had brought down was, like her, wearing all-encompassing armour, but by then she knew his identity well enough. He was breathing with difficulty, and his movements felt fragile and agitated, as if under all that fine ceramite plating there was something withered and broken clinging on to life. She could hear the boots of the storm troopers all around them both, and knew they would fire the instant they believed her life to be in danger.

'Be still, my lord,' she said out loud. 'You are among friends.'

He stopped struggling. His head briefly lifted.

'It is me,' she told him. 'Spinoza. You are safe.'

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She watched him reach up, gingerly, to twist his helm off. The face revealed was a mess – dryer and greyer than ever, bruised in the hollows of his cheeks, mottled around his deep-set eyes. An ugly weal was just visible above the throat-line. He looked half-starved.

She knelt down next to him and waited for him to speak. Zijes and the others clustered in close, but she ignored them.

‘Good to see you again, Spinoza,’ Crowl said eventually. His voice was thinner than before, not much more than a hoarse whisper. ‘You’ll have to tell me, one day, how you caught up.’

It was strangely affecting, to see him like this. She didn’t like it. At their first meeting, she had been a little taken aback by his austere appearance, his evident age and lack of condition. Now, it felt almost pitiful, like the sudden realisation that a parent had ceased to be a provider and become a dependant.

‘You are sick,’ she said. ‘Can I assist?’

Crowl smiled dryly, the crooked gesture she’d not realised she’d missed. ‘Not unless you can turn back time.’

‘Revus has supplies. From Erunion.’

‘Too late for that, I think.’

Zijes crouched down beside her. ‘We can’t stay here,’ he hissed.

Spinoza paid him no heed. ‘Why did you leave? We could have aided you.’

‘Like you did in the Mountain?’ Crowl coughed painfully. ‘But then you never believed.’ His focus seemed to flicker in and out, his pupils dilating strangely. ‘Because there is no escape, after this. No escape. You are young. You deserve to survive.’

He had always been lucid. Even after the events inside the Forbidden Fortress, when she had feared he was losing his mind, he had been articulate. Now, though…

‘I am bound to serve,’ she said. ‘That matters more than survival.’

‘Does it? Does it?’ He looked briefly unsure. ‘I taught that my whole life. And now? To live a life. To *really* live. What other aim could be more important?’

And now this was heresy. Not the casual carelessness of the past, but a full descent into deviance. Spinoza looked hard into his parched features, and saw only emptiness there, the final victory of cold cynicism.

‘What have you discovered here?’ she asked, her voice soft.

‘We have to go,’ said Zijes, urgently now. He gestured to his troops, and two of them came up to Crowl to drag him to his feet. ‘I’ve summoned the landers.’

That seemed to animate Crowl at last. His eyes found their focus, his chin snapped up, he brushed them off with surprising vigour.

‘Madness! I have found madness. You are an inquisitor too, yes? So listen. Jarrod uncovered it. I told him not to, told him he’d be discovered, but he kept at it. They killed him, you know? Franck. A stupid waste – he was no harm to them – but we must have scared someone.’ He shook his head, and a stray snarl of black hair fell across his forehead. ‘Let me tell you what they have done. Let me tell you what madness has possessed them, the fools. There was a doorway. Here, the one you came here for. It has been here since before the Imperium itself existed, an old spur into the no-realm of the xenos. How can that have been tolerated, you ask? It wasn’t. It was capped, rendered inert, its power drained from it. Who did that? I don’t know. Maybe the High Lords of long ago. Maybe the Emperor Himself, when He walked among His people. Whoever it was, they did a fine job.

They made it safe. No power could open it from the far side – the way was closed. And for millennia no power on *this* side could have opened it, either. Not a soul knew it was there, and the knowledge had faded. It was safe. It was gone.'

This kind of speech was the worst of all. It was hurried, the words spilling out too fast, and Crowl's eyes glittered as his cracked lips moved. He had been like this in the Mountain. Spinoza found it hard to listen to.

'But here was the treachery,' he said, still rapid. 'The traitors had to travel to *them*. The xenos. They had to travel from here without detection, leaving no trail, into the forbidden realm. So they ferried the pain-bringer to Skhallax, and *it* taught them how to open the gate. Because it could only be done from this side, you see that? Like a door with a lock on one side. The creature gave them what they needed to remake the portal. And while Terra was suffering, while the Imperium needed every possible resource just to stave off collapse, *that* was what those bastards worked on. They built their bridge into the no-realm, then they ferried the mechanisms here. And then they opened it. And then ruin fell upon them.'

Even Zijes was listening now. 'The battle,' he said.

'Yes, the battle. There was a reason the door had been shut. Once it was open, anything could come through. And it did. Something terrible.' Crowl looked briefly confused. 'Or maybe something wonderful. I don't know. I didn't see it.' Then he blinked hard, and focus returned. 'They risked everything. They risked Terra itself for this insanity. Their plan to keep it secret has failed in the most spectacular way. All eyes were on Luna – *all* of them! You could laugh, if it wasn't so enraging. But now they are trying to hide it all. Raskian is gone. It's still live, the whole thing.'

Zijes looked like he wanted to shake the old man. 'Speak plainly,' he snapped, clearly eager to be gone but needing to know. 'What happened?'

'They went through,' Crowl said. 'Weeks ago. All of them – the Fabricator General, his entourage, the delegation. Raskian has total control of what remains of the Project. After that, the portal was sealed again, but not so well this time. I was on Luna by then, trying to follow Raskian, but I couldn't get close enough – I still didn't have the right location, not exactly. But then the gate was smashed, broken by something coming from the other side, something unrelated to any of this, and that caused every ship on Luna and Terra and Mars itself to race over here and rain down fire. There was

fighting, yes. I do not know against what – I was too slow. But it is over now, and somehow the Mechanicus has resumed control of the site. They do not allow anyone to get close. Official word is that the portal has been destroyed, but I do not believe it. The delegation is still in there – the no-realm. They have to get back. So the Mechanicus needs to pretend the gate no longer works, that it is safe now and that they merely intend to study it, but in truth they are keeping it active for their master, so he can come back once the work is done. So we have to find a way in. You see that? We have to get inside.'

Zijes snorted. 'We're not going anywhere near that compound.'

'We must!'

'Forget it – we don't have the numbers.'

'You must commandeer forces, inquisitor. I can help you.'

Zijes lost patience then, and gestured again to his troops. Crowl was dragged to his feet and Channa made to pull out. Zijes got up to do the same, just as the faint thrum of the incoming landers became audible, only to run straight into Spinoza, who wasn't moving.

'Listen to him,' she said firmly.

Zijes reached for his laspistol. 'Don't even think about it,' he warned. 'I've got you both now – more than Arx hoped for – and that's all I care about.'

So that was it. Nothing to do with the real threat, just the chance to double his haul. 'You are making a serious mistake,' Spinoza said, holding her ground. 'I told you what is at stake.'

'You told me a bunch of unevidenced theories, all of which originate from that… *man* over there. Who's quite obviously insane.'

'He is not.'

'Suit yourself. Not a chance I'm willing to take.'

But she had already given the signal. As the rumble of the nearing landers became a thudding growl, Revus, Khazad and the rest of the storm troopers formed up around her, weapons drawn. She activated Argent, sending a flare of disruptor-energy bleeding out across the depression.

'You do not wish to start a firefight,' she said. 'Not here.'

'I don't,' agreed Zijes. 'But I will, if you force it.'

The dust around them started to shiver, then to drum. Time was running out.

'You know I will not go with you,' said Spinoza, holding her ground. 'Not

now.’

‘Not your decision to make. Final warning – *stand down*.’

Spinoza kept her finger on Argent’s power-trigger. The noise of the incoming ships became deafening, throwing the dust up in ever-larger clouds. She felt frustration burn up within her, rising hot in her gorge. Better to fight and die than go back to Terra meekly – but then Crowl’s work would die with them. She tensed her muscles, knowing that as soon as she moved, Revus would be doing the same, Khazad would be there, Gorgias would be flinging needles around like confetti at a legal coupling…

And then for some reason, she glanced out of the corner of her eye at Crowl, who was hanging limply from Zijes’ troops. His age-parched face was staring straight at her.

No, he mouthed, then gave her his old hooked, cryptic smile.

She froze. No one else moved. They remained static even as the landers finally touched down in a thunder of lumens and thrusters, throwing thick clouds of dust over everything. Too late did she notice that they hadn’t come down in the same place as before. Too late did she notice that the descent had been so loud because there were more of them before, and they weren’t in anything like the same livery – their slab-sides were gold and white, not Inquisitorial black, and they had the marks and ident-markings of Astra Militarum units.

Zijes suddenly realised the same thing, and backed up towards the lead ground transport. ‘What is this?’ he demanded, shouting over to Channa, who seemed to be frantically asking for clarification over the vox-link to the *Acheros*.

The lander doors opened, and soldiers piled out. Dozens of them, Palatine Sentinels, armed and ready, racing to take fire-positions.

‘Lower your weapons!’ came a vox-enhanced command from one of them – a woman’s voice. ‘I say again – lower your weapons. You have ten seconds to comply.’

Zijes might have resisted, even then. Spinoza knew he would be running exactly the same calculations she had just done, gauging whether he could survive the first few seconds of a fight long enough to reach cover and start organising some kind of resistance. Storm troopers had better gear and training than all but the best Militarum troops, so the numbers were not the only factor in play, but surely even he would be thinking of other options

than fighting.

What happened next, though, sealed the deal. Amid the flying clouds of ash grey, a secondary tranche of armoured figures, far larger, far heavier, were emerging into the forefront. These ones had drawn no weapon, and cared nothing about seeking either cover or a vantage from which to take a shot – they needed neither. The giants lumbered up through the whirling haze, their battleplate so ornate and overblown that it underscored their owner's contempt for any kind of deception, glinting like the golden statues of Ministorum cathedrals as their helm lenses glowed an angry crimson.

Zijes was transfixed, perhaps trying to work out whether such things could possibly be real, or whether this was some colossal scam with him as its subject. No one moved, no one spoke – even battle-hardened storm troopers merely gawped.

All, that was, except Crowl, who sat like a beggar in the shadows, shoulders rocking as he gently chuckled.

'Not quite careful enough, Spinoza,' he murmured to himself, lost in his own private amusement. 'But Throne be praised. *He's* back.'

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

You could never forget what a shock it was to witness them. It all came rushing back to Spinoza in an instant – the dread, the cold wash of fight-or-flight, the tide of awe that crippled and stupefied. Some of that came from their sheer size, the colossal heft of their ancient weapons, but there was more to it than that – the way they moved, the barely conscious arrogance of their gait and bearing. They were earthbound gods, creatures of myth rendered into flesh and metal. Everything they did – every move of that impossibly fine armour, every fractional turn of those high helms – spoke of silent but constant disappointment, of being shackled to a plane that was unworthy of them and yet in which they were still compelled to serve.

Nine of them had come. Nine warriors of the Adeptus Custodes, fabled guardians of the Emperor Himself. Spinoza watched them in silence, just as all the others did. The lasguns were lowered, preparations for combat immediately abandoned. Zijes looked utterly cowed, Crowl darkly gleeful.

Spinoza immediately recognised the livery of their commander – Crowl's old contact, the one called Navradaran. As the last dust clouds ebbed away, she saw the damage to his armour. It was extensive – jewels ripped from

their clasps, long burns and scrapes down the auramite surfaces. She glanced sidelong, and saw that all the others of his order were the same.

Something had fought them. Something had damaged them. That alone was cause for a fresh pang of dread.

Navradaran approached Crowl, who was released immediately by his captors.

‘Are you in pain?’ the Custodian asked. His voice was a soft, deep rumble, echoing from the innards of his mighty armour-shell.

‘Nothing significant,’ Crowl lied, attempting to stand up straight. ‘I tried to reach you. Many times.’

‘So I understand,’ Navradaran said. ‘I was detained elsewhere.’

‘And you have been fighting.’

‘I have.’

‘Here? At the ship graveyard?’

‘On Terra.’

‘So what happened?’

‘The galaxy changed,’ said Navradaran flatly. He turned to look at Spinoza, then Zijes, then back to Crowl. ‘Time is short. Here is what you need to know. I was ordered to leave the Throneworld, but I left others – Captain Antrisa here among them – to work on the trails you had unearthed. A watch was placed on the Senatorum. Raskian became a person of enquiry, though even for us it was hard to get close. Now he is gone, vindicating what you believed. I sought you out, but that was difficult – I was in the void still, and your location was unknown. Your interrogator, whom we were observing, almost eluded us too, but not quite. We were able to track from distance, trusting that she would lead us to you before it was too late.’

Crowl grinned at Spinoza. ‘She’s very good, isn’t she?’

‘You would have tried to follow Raskian on your own, I take it,’ said Navradaran.

‘I would,’ said Crowl. ‘I was working on it. I had ideas. Very good ideas. That’s the only solution now, you see that? They have to be followed. They have to be destroyed.’

‘You would never have got inside!’ blurted Zijes. His gaze shifted between Crowl and the Custodian, as if appealing for reason from at least one of them. ‘Dead before you got within eyesight of it.’

‘Ha.’ Crowl spat up something flaky from his throat, and swallowed painfully. ‘You have no idea of the places I’ve got into. Spinoza will tell you. She knows.’

‘But you said they passed through the portal weeks ago,’ Zijes pressed. ‘So their work may be done, one way or the other. They might all be dead, or captive, or worse.’

‘Maybe so,’ said Crowl. ‘But we have to be sure, no? We have to run him down. We have to eliminate all doubt. We have to see the truth with our own eyes.’ Then his voice dropped, sinking into a conspiratorial whisper. ‘If he lives still, if this atrocity is still active, it must be *halted*. Surely you see that now.’ He switched his gaze to Navradaran. ‘It cannot be allowed to go on. All must be burned. All must be destroyed. *Toto en infernis*. Yes.’

Gorgias’ oculus flickered a little. Revus give Spinoza a quick glance.

But it was Navradaran who spoke next, perhaps the only one of them who had anything like the authority to settle the matter.

‘Know this, all of you,’ he said. ‘Holy Terra, heart of the Imperium, has come under attack. Abominations have walked both in this place and across the hallowed precincts of the Palace itself. A name from the forgotten age has returned amid fire and fury, and none know yet what his return portends. And despite all that, despite all that my order is required to do now, I am here. I bring eight of my brothers with me. I would not have done so were they not needed.’ He inclined his head towards Crowl. Was that a sign of respect? Or merely affirmation of the policy? ‘Because you are correct, inquisitor. We must enter the webway now, locate the Fabricator General, and uncover the truth.’

An uncomfortable silence fell. The wind moaned around the gathering, stirring the pale dust. Spinoza hardly dared to process that. It had all been about finding Crowl, forever deferring thoughts about what to do next until he had been discovered. Now it felt like they were racing ahead, all caution thrown aside, and still so much was unclear.

Zijes, predictably enough, was having none of it.

‘Madness,’ he spat, shaking his head before turning, with commendable fearlessness, on Navradaran. ‘So there is, you all tell me, some arcane and undisclosed issue with the Holy Golden Throne. And a High Lord of the Imperium has taken it upon himself to investigate it and remedy it. And now this madman has taken it upon himself to *stop* him. And you, a

guardian of the sacred Palace itself, are in support of this.'

'Xenos are the ancient enemy!' Crowl blurted. 'This is *their* plan, not ours. If the Throne is in jeopardy – and we do not know for sure that it is – then its salvation must come from its occupier alone, not the hands of our predators.'

'And you don't think this High Lord might have considered that?' Zijes countered. 'You don't think – for a minute – that he might only be doing this because it's the last possible chance to do what's needed?' Zijes drew in a long breath of Luna's thin air. 'You're taking a lot on yourself, inquisitor.'

Navradaran interposed again, his voice as calm as ever. 'You only voice what we all feel, inquisitor,' he said. 'Doubt. But this is the central point – the masters of the Project kept their mission secret from the rest of the Council. It is being pursued in the shadows because its instigators know full well their peers would never have authorised it. It may be necessary, but it may also be the greatest of heresies. The truth must be uncovered, and judgement delivered.'

Zijes exhaled, frustrated. 'So you're as insane as he is.'

'Maybe so, inquisitor, but you are implicated in this by your own volition, and thus your services will be required.'

'And if I refuse?'

'I did not *ask*, inquisitor. I trust you will be wise enough to understand that.' The Custodian turned to Spinoza. 'You also, interrogator. We have served alongside one another before – now we shall do so again.'

Spinoza bowed. This thing had its own momentum now, and like ships on the tide, they were all carried along by it.

'By your will, lord,' she said. 'And may we all bring honour to the Throne we serve.'

The Custodians started to make preparations immediately. They took the auspex readings from both Spinoza's and Zijes' troops and drew up a plan of assault. The transports were uncovered and the engines restarted. Both sets of storm troopers rearmed, and Captain Antrisa formed her own forces up for deployment.

Crowl limped across to Revus and Khazad, seemingly eager to be reunited with them. Spinoza watched him go, feeling a mix of emotions as she took in his physical decrepitude. She'd have to speak to him again now, ensure

clarity before they began this, but hesitated before following.

Zijes moved over to join her. ‘So you found him at last,’ he said dryly.

‘I was always going to.’

‘And you still believe him?’

Spinoza watched Crowl stumble on the stones towards Revus, his back hunched, his fingers trembling. ‘I am bound to serve.’

Zijes snorted. ‘You’re a type, you know that, Spinoza? A definite type. One that occupies every chamber of every spire in this Imperium. Your faith never wavers, your imagination never leaps. You say your prayers, you take your orders. You despise the sin of pride, you distrust the vice of ambition, because, in your heart, you wish only to serve. Not bad for an interrogator. Useless for an inquisitor.’

‘And you suffer from no such limitations.’

‘How could I? They gave me the rosette.’ Zijes drew closer to her, holding her gaze. ‘You won’t be able to serve in *there*. You’ll have to choose. Your mad master has already set his demented course, and a Custodian is hardly a creature of unbounded creative horizons. It’ll be you. You’ll have to decide whether to let it all go on.’

‘You too.’

‘The last sane ones standing.’

‘So what will your choice be?’

‘Right now? No idea.’ He broke away from her, and started to walk back over to where Channa was checking over the transports for reactivation. ‘When I make it, you’ll be the first to know.’

He left it at that, went back to Channa, and so Spinoza finally followed Crowl into the shadow of the westward dustbank. By the time she caught up with him, he was talking animatedly to Revus.

‘Captain,’ he was saying. ‘Good to have you here. Very good. We will need every hellgun we have, I think. Just like in the Fortress, eh? Where is Hegain?’

‘Guarding Courvain, lord.’

‘Ah, yes. Good. Prudent.’ And then Crowl’s expression faltered. ‘Not to see the place again, though. Sad, that.’

‘I anticipate our safe return, lord,’ Spinoza said firmly. ‘He will guard the faithful.’

‘And you, assassin,’ said Crowl, barely acknowledging that. ‘Still burning

for justice? Still out to complete what your old master began? I do hope so.'

'Vengeance-debt still stands,' Khazad said warily. 'As does loyalty-debt.'

'Good, good. I like those terms.'

Gorgias hovered in close, still streaked with oil and seemingly bashful about it, but Crowl finally noticed him and looked genuinely delighted. 'You, too!' he said. 'So we are all back together, the best of us, even the oldest, ready to complete this thing and end its malice.'

It all felt awkward. It felt absurd. It felt like some strange family-unit reunion, rather than the culmination of a desperate hunt for a senior Imperial servant whose motives were now matters of terrible doubt. Crowl had never been like this before – any levity had been acidic, any cynicism tempered by the total commitment to the case. Now his moods seemed to flicker like a faulty sodium bulb – one moment, jovial; the next, morose.

'Lord, we need to speak candidly, while we can,' Spinoza said. 'The Custodian can handle the fighting at the portal. That is his speciality. After that, the decisions will be ours.'

Crowl raised an eyebrow. *'Ours?'*

'So what is your intention, when we are inside? What is your expectation? There has been no time to even discuss such things.'

'My intention.' Crowl nodded sagely, pursing his cracked lips. 'My expectation. Good thoughts, Spinoza. Very good thoughts.' He looked briefly confused, briefly disorientated, but then clarity snapped back, and for a moment he was the Crowl of old – decisive, calm, precise. 'My expectation is that our path will be clear once we are through that gate. Jarrod gave me his best estimation of how matters would go, and I believe I can use that knowledge to guide us. I am led to believe that the realm has certain characteristics. Will and intention have great importance within it. If we do not suffer from doubt, if we maintain a clear image of where we wish to arrive at and why, then we will be successful.'

'And when we arrive at our destination?'

'Then we have what we need to end it all.'

Spinoza hesitated. 'And is the Custodian in agreement with this?'

'He must surely be.'

'With respect, I do not believe that. I believe he is still investigating, rather than having a conclusion already in mind.'

Crowl began to look impatient. 'What possible conclusion could there be

here, other than destruction? Immediate, total destruction?'

'The Custodians are charged to protect the Throne. If they believe this is the only way to–'

'These are *xenos*, Spinoza. Aliens. The oldest foe, the *eternal enemy*. Raskian is a traitor, just as Franck was, and there has only ever been one sentence passed for those.'

Spinoza drew in a deep, unwilling breath. This was the moment. 'That is not my intention, lord. We do not know enough. I intend to observe. To gather evidence. To consult with the allies that providence has given us, and then – only then – to act.'

Crowl looked immediately enraged, incredulous, and Spinoza knew exactly what he wanted to say. *I am the inquisitor. You are the servant.*

But he had forfeited that, the moment he left without saying a word, and he suddenly seemed to realise it. He stared at Revus, and then Khazad, and must have sensed the truth – his authority had been dented. They would never say it openly, but they all knew it. They would observe the courtesies, use the formal titles, but it was Spinoza they had fought alongside in the Fortress, Spinoza who had preserved Courvain, and Spinoza who had brought them to Luna.

She felt shabby about it, all the same. Hierarchy was sacred.

'You're right,' Crowl said, backing down. He even offered her a twisted smile, a brief nod of acknowledgement. 'You are entirely correct. We do not know enough. We must pursue, we must be sure. Very good. Well said.'

None of the others said a word. Even Gorgias was silent.

She had to give him something. The relation of power between them had shifted, probably for good, but she had to keep certain illusions in place for the duration of this exercise – for all that he was clearly damaged, he was still essential to it all. He had Navradaran's confidence, he knew more than any of them about the origins of the Project, and, most of all, he had an insight into the xenos he professed to loathe that went beyond anything they could easily comprehend. Perhaps more than that, though, she still felt the debt of loyalty, deeper than anything she had shared with Tur.

'You will lead us in there, lord,' she said firmly. 'The Custodian and the inquisitor can do what they will, but we remain committed to the path you set us on.'

He almost looked grateful. 'One gift given,' he said, in little more than a

mumble.

Another returned, she thought. *For now.*

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They left soon after that. The Astra Militarum squads kitted up and dispersed into Chimera carriers, while the storm troopers clambered into the Atamis. The vehicles shuddered into life and started to rumble across the dust. No concessions were made to secrecy this time – speed was of the essence. The drivers fell into convoy formation and accelerated hard across the open plains.

For some time after they set off, Spinoza saw no sign of the Custodians. Peering out of the viewfinder only gave her sight of the empty wastes again – the coal-black skies and layers of ashen dust. The troop carrier shook and rattled, belching out smoke as it trundled closer to the target. Before long, though, she heard something moving at speed just beyond her view. It was a strange noise – a low whine, muffled by distance but masking something clearly powerful. The next she knew, a gold-and-red blur shot past the convoy on the left flank and disappeared ahead. Another one followed, and this time she got a faint glimpse of its outline – a long blunt hunk of auramite with a golden eagle prow and splayed stabilisers, throwing up furrows of dust as it skated just above ground level.

‘Jetbikes,’ she murmured in appreciation. ‘Worth coming here just to see

those.’

The Custodians had obviously detected something ahead, and like wheeling raptors had moved to engage. By the time the land transports caught up, all that remained were twisted heaps of burned metal, strewn across the rocks with glowing edges where energy weapons had sliced through, so completely wrecked that it wasn’t obvious what kind of machines had been destroyed.

They pushed on. More encounters followed, only announced by the whoosh and thrum of jetbikes haring off into the dark, followed by distant flashes of light then the clash and boom of explosives. A few moments later, the transports would roar through the debris, their axles crunching over the shreds and slivers of steel.

The chrono-count had started. Some of those sentries must have fired off an alarm before being destroyed, and so the compound’s commanders would now be aware that something was incoming. The transports went at maximum speed, crashing through loose scree-dunes before bumping and careening down the slopes beyond.

Soon the perimeter wall loomed on the far horizon, backlit by that acidic glow, its makeshift ramparts abuzz with sudden activity. Flickers of las-fire and arc-detonation began to fly towards them. It was hard to make out exactly what was happening – the viewfield was extremely restricted – but the gunners seemed to be trying to take out the jetbikes. Free of the worst of the incoming fire, the transports kept on coming, racing as hard as their stolid engines could take them.

Then there was a sudden explosion up ahead – much larger than the others – followed by a dazzling wash of electric blue light. Spinoza could just about make out heavy chunks of rockcrete sailing through the air, followed by the metallic blare of alert emitters. More arc-lumens blazed into life, more units seemed to be mobilised. Her tactical scanners were crowded up with local signals, hundreds of them, swarming in like scuttling insects from all across the compound.

They were almost at the breach. The jetbikes angled back round to draw more fire before rising up on their repulsor plates and unloading blistering torrents of bolter shells. The parapets erupted into flying debris as reactor-units were detonated and plasma chambers burst.

Antrisa’s lead Chimera gained the breach and powered on through. The

rest followed close behind, crashing over and through the rubble of the perimeter wall. The lurid electric light washed over them, accompanied by the vivid tang of Mars – machine oils, polished metal, chems and rad-canisters.

Spinoza tried to get a clear view of their destination, but the jerk and thud of the moving transport prevented her. She caught a glimpse of translucent sheeting, flapping wildly as the jetbikes raked in close, but that was snatched away as soon as it had come. Hard rounds impacted on the carrier's external armour, skittering along its flanks like drumming fingernails. The Militarum Chimeras were firing back now, but that wouldn't last long – they weren't here to fight, just to break through to the centre.

Then the carrier hit something, or was hit by something, and everything whirled and skidded around its axis. The entire chassis almost upended, but the driver managed to wrench the controls enough to haul them around in a tight arc, tilted over on one track. More impacts smacked across the exposed underside, pushing the Atami clean over. For a stomach-lurching second they were poised at forty-five degrees, churning through the dust and rubble in clouds of engine smoke.

'Brace!' Spinoza cried, just before the entire structure slammed hard to the dirt. The occupants, secured in their restraints, either found themselves on their backs or suspended from the crew bay's new roof. 'Out, out, out!'

They were horribly vulnerable now, and they all knew it. The restraints snapped back as the hatches were blown open. Troopers dropped to the deck, trying to avoid crunching into their counterparts already scrambling for the exits. More hits came in, punching bulges into the metal shell. The engine was struck, followed by the dreaded splatter and hiss of escaping promethium.

'Run!' Spinoza shouted, shoving the last of the troopers through the gaping exit hatch and following them out.

She emerged into the whirl, roar and confusion of a hastily pitched battle. Most of the other carriers had made it to the portal approach and were now busily disgorging their human cargo. The Custodians were still all mounted, scorching across the compound in a whirl of bolter-fuelled destruction. They were truly horrific to witness in action, once up close and unleashed – pure vortices of destruction that swooped like golden vultures on the

Mechanicus troops, slaying with an almost casual abandon even as swarms of tech-guard rushed to engage.

The portal itself lay a few hundred metres ahead, its wrapping torn free, its tall arching structure wreathed in crackles of unbound energy. Spinoza saw Zijes leading his warriors up to the gateway, protected by heavy covering fire from Antrisa's units. Both groups were being engaged by skitarii – human-shaped constructs with cowls and glowing eyepieces, bipedal walkers that swivelled and lurched before launching heavy bursts of solid-round fire, quadrupedal war machines that looked like giant metal crabs, wading across the packed Lunar earth to get close enough to unleash.

Even the Custodians wouldn't keep all those at bay for long – the only hope was to keep moving and get out before they were overwhelmed. Spinoza ran hard, firing from her laspistol as she went. One of her storm troopers was hit and fell to the ground, rolling in the debris. Then Crowl, limping along ahead of her, was struck too. His armour absorbed the worst of it, but he was still sent tumbling, his ragged cloak flaring around him before he smacked into the dust.

She raced over to him, hauled him up, kept him moving. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Revus firing hellgun bursts as he sprinted, Khazad doing the same. A Custodian leapt from his jetbike and crashed bodily into a knot of skitarii, scattering them before reaching for his guardian spear to hack them apart. The air itself felt electric, cut open with arcs of loosed energy. Gorgias darted through it all, yammering wildly as he deployed his needle gun.

By then Zijes had gone through. Dozens had gone with him or were racing to gain the portal. The rest of the Custodians were dismounting, crunching to earth to shepherd the last of them in. More of Antrisa's command were downed in the intense lattice of fire, two of them caught in some kind of arc-energy, others ripped apart by beam-weapons carried by the closing-in walkers.

Crowl was struggling – panting hard, not supporting his weight – so Spinoza worked harder, her boots slipping on the oil-splattered stones, attempting to fire one-handed while she dragged her master along with the other. A Custodian – it might have been Navradaran – surged past her on the right-hand side, soaking up hits, before scything a flurry of bolts from his spear and silencing an entire rank of oncoming Mechanicus troops.

The portal loomed above them. It was bigger than she'd imagined – maybe fifty metres tall, thirty across. The structure was typically Martian – a bolted-on, riveted-up mess of bulky power packs and energy converters, strung liberally with cabling and coolant pipes, hissing violently as the vents and valves discharged in sequence. Under it all, beneath the bundles and the boxes, was something far stranger, some kind of dark, mottled material arranged in smooth curves, far too slender to be structurally sound, surely, but there nonetheless, ancient and strange.

It felt wrong. Even amid all the flying bolts and lacerating arc-weapons, the portal was the only thing that felt truly dangerous. Crowl had been right about that, at least – it should never have been unearthed, and certainly never activated. The one thing she was sure about was that when this was over, it had to be annihilated, razed so completely that no force of insanity or hubris could ever risk opening it again.

Spinoza launched into a final push, hauling Crowl up a series of cracked and time-worn stone steps. For a split second she found herself staring into a seething wall of esoteric matter, strung like a gauze across the high-arched aperture. It rippled, shimmered, flexed, and yet there was nothing to see – no colours, no extension, just an… absence. You couldn't even focus on it – any attempt to look directly, and your eyes slid away immediately, instinctively hunting for something natural to latch on to. In its own way, it was as horrific as anything she had ever encountered.

The home of the makers. The bloodied crone.

She gripped tight to Crowl's armour. From somewhere – maybe ahead – she heard a howling, perhaps a screaming. Curls of actinic force snapped and scampered across her armour, and she felt the tug of both attraction and repulsion, as if it were simultaneously pulling her in and shoving her out.

'Do it,' croaked Crowl, pressing eagerly towards the arch, his boots slipping on the stone.

Her heart pounding, her saner instincts pleading with her to flee from it and never look back, Spinoza scrambled forward, surrounded by a corona of energy beams and las-fire. She screwed her eyes shut, and shoved them both across the threshold.

And then everything – every sound, every sight, every smell – abruptly disappeared.

She opened her eyes, stunned by the sudden silence. She had emerged into

some kind of huge tunnel, arched and ribbed, constructed in the same smooth, dark material as the arch behind them. A fine mist coated it all, cooling and coiling in the hollows. New sights and smells replaced the ones of the real world – glistening silk-like presences, ghosting and dissipating. A sweet aroma, like crushed flowers, hung in the air. Condensation rose up from the floor, thick as the fogs of Astranta. It was very cold, and she felt the perspiration on her skin cool rapidly. Any last trace of Luna – even a clear *memory* of Luna – had disappeared.

Crowl looked up. He untangled himself from Spinoza's grip and reached for his helm.

'Lord, I–' Spinoza started, but it was too late. Crowl lifted it off, clamped it to his belt, and drew in a long, deep breath. A smile slowly spread across his withered face, and he turned to her, his eyes alive with pleasure.

'Marvellous,' he croaked.

But he didn't look marvellous. The black lines around his eyes were more intense in this place's strange ambient light. His grey pallor had deepened, making his face look skull-like.

Behind him, the curtain of nothingness shuddered again, and the Custodians crashed through, together with the last of the regular troops. As soon as they were in, they turned and deployed a lattice of vortex charges, clamping them to the xenos structure of the inner gate. The last of the charges was locked in place, then two heavy void shield generators were clamped on to them. Navradaran stepped away from the array and activated the power, causing a glittering interference field to snap in place over the aperture.

'Keep moving,' Navradaran ordered. 'This will not hold forever, and there will be dangers ahead.'

'Danger behind, danger ahead,' Crowl murmured, his hands shaking badly now. He looked up at Spinoza. 'Just the way we like it, eh?'

She looked into his ill-focusing eyes.

'Not really, lord,' she said flatly, and started to march. 'I like nothing much about this at all.'

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Revus went watchfully through the dark. All those who had made it through the gate clustered together, going cautiously. Spinoza was just ahead of him, Crowl close by. The other inquisitor, Zijes, was further up the column. There was no sign of Antrisa – he'd have welcomed speaking to her again – and fewer than forty Palatine Sentinels appeared to have made it. Of Courvain's own complement, only Hosh was missing. Zijes' troopers looked to have left a handful behind, but all the Custodians were present. It felt like a paltry gathering for what they had in mind, something that surely wouldn't trouble a serious enemy, but then again a single Custodian was worth a whole battalion of lesser troops, so maybe it wasn't total madness. Not his place to judge, of course.

The space they moved through was a tunnel, of sorts. Its roof was lost in a haze of fine mist, its floor the same. At times it felt like they were walking on nothing at all, at times their feet struck firm ground below. A low light bled out from somewhere, illuminating the various structures at the tunnel's edge, though it wasn't clear where from. Revus had the constant, disorientating feeling that the path was suspended impossibly high over some enormous gulf, hanging as if from a spider's thread, and that if the

fragile material underfoot were to break then they would all plummet for eternity. The more he tried to put the image out of his mind, the more it fixed there, as if the webway itself were taunting him with it.

Khazad was next to him. The two of them had fought beside one another in the compound, slotting back into old rhythms again, both accounting for kills. The assassin had put her pistol away and now carried her blade.

It felt… natural. To have her walking with him.

‘Remember how it was?’ he asked her, voice low, as he looked ahead to the massive shadowed outline of a Custodian. The golden warriors had taken up guard positions throughout the column, their halberds active and glimmering with power as they strode. ‘Before, down in the tunnels?’

‘I do,’ she said.

‘Thought they were gone forever.’

‘As did I.’ She laughed. ‘We are very small part of this, captain. Just toys for these gods, I think.’

‘Still here, though. Still hanging on.’

‘Yes. We are still here.’

Revus glanced over at Crowl. ‘So what do you think?’

She shook her head. ‘Not good. But then, on his own for a long time. You have medicae?’

‘I do. He didn’t want it.’

‘Not being alone. That does most good.’

‘That’s right.’ He stared up higher, to where the mists gathered under the high tunnel roof. ‘Strange place. Where are the owners?’

‘They will show up,’ said Khazad, almost eagerly, hefting her blade and patting the edge.

‘A new test for you.’

‘And you.’ She looked at him. ‘And us.’

Revus laughed. ‘I’d rather avoid it. We have to hope he knows where he’s going.’

Khazad nodded, and looked at Crowl again. She looked at him for a long time.

‘He knows where to go,’ she said, though her voice didn’t radiate with certainty. ‘He has to.’

Spinoza didn’t feel like talking to him. Not the way he was now. Her

feelings had become complex – relief, at discovering him alive, but also frustration at the change in him. Nothing could be done about it, not when they were forced to keep moving, keep fighting, force their way to a destination that none of them knew enough about. Survival came first; the rest could follow.

Crowl kept pace with her, though. His mood, at least, seemed to have improved.

‘Just look at this place,’ he whispered, awestruck. He was gazing up and around him as he limped along, enthralled by what he was seeing.

Everything about the environment felt hostile. She could feel it in her bones – a low-level harmonic of violence, a tingling sense of outrage. When she put her boots through the condensation-layer, it made her entire lower leg ache. When she looked up at the arches, a throb broke out behind her eyes.

Slowly, her heart rate and breathing returned to normal. She watched the others react to their surroundings – going warily, carefully, but keeping up the pace, knowing that the barrier erected behind them was flimsy and might be breached sooner rather than later.

‘I am surprised it appeals to you,’ she said at last, trying not to let her gaze linger on the faint spectres that darted and shook on the edge of her vision. ‘You have always nurtured such powerful hatred for them.’

Crowl chuckled dryly. ‘You can hate a thing, yet admire its works.’

The place felt more like a biological construct than a mechanical one – a creation of psychically soaked bone and sinew, though finished to an aching level of perfection.

‘And it means we’re getting close at last. Close, close. *Proximo, proximo.*’

‘How can you know?’

‘Because it draws me.’ He turned to her and grinned, something that made his cadaverous face distort. ‘I understand how it works.’

‘Because of the… creature.’

‘It’s here. Somewhere.’ Then he looked pained again, as if a real spasm of agony had shuddered through him. ‘No mirrors, though. No ways for it to get at me. That’s something.’

‘Mirrors?’

‘How they travel. How they see you, how they reach you.’ He winced. ‘I couldn’t look at them any more. Not at home. Not anywhere. I saw it in

them, all the time.’

‘So that’s why you smashed them all.’ She couldn’t approve. It was superstition – something that an ordinary citizen might get in trouble for.

‘I had to. It could have used them, got through one, got into my mind.’ Then he drew in a shaky breath, tried to relax himself. ‘But in here… I feel better. I can start to understand things. Work them out. It wounded me, see? I wounded it. The blood… mixed. I feel it now, in here. Pumping. Keeping me alive.’

Spinoza didn’t reply. She couldn’t think of anything to say to that.

The tunnel eventually led them into a larger chamber. Its roof disappeared off beyond sight, curdled with more of the floating, drifting mist, and its walls curved round to enclose a perfectly circular space. Two apertures lay ahead of them, each one marked with a xenos rune over the lintel. A very faint echo of something like music hovered just on the fringe of earshot, coming and going, with no obvious origin.

Navradaran gave the command to halt, and the troops assembled in the centre of the space. A few took the opportunity to break out canteens or protein bars, some tended to armour damage or reloaded, while most merely stood or squatted in silence, clearly daunted by the place they found themselves in. Gorgias rose up a little higher into the mists, rotating carefully, as if surveying the structure for flaws he might exploit.

‘Captain Antrisa was killed,’ the Custodian announced. ‘Who is her second?’

A man raised his hand. ‘Lieutenant Devra, lord,’ he said.

‘You are now in command of your units – ensure they are fully operational from this point onward.’ He turned his inscrutable, full-helmed gaze across the rest of the party. ‘This is the webway. You will already have sensed its power. This place is not made for our kind, and the longer we remain within it, the more extreme its effects will become. You may begin to experience mental disquiet. You may believe that you see things, or sense threats, that turn out not to be real. Be vigilant. Some of these feelings will be illusory, though that cannot be guaranteed. Remain close to one another, verify sightings with your comrades, report dangers swiftly.’

Even as the Custodian spoke, the truth of what he said became ever more apparent. The distant, tinkling music ebbed and waxed, threatening to become maddening in its almost-audible nature. The smell, which had first

been subtle, now intensified, becoming oppressive, and was hard to dislodge from the nostrils.

Spinoza glanced over at the doorways again, looking up at the runes on the lintels. Were they changed from before? Every time she looked somewhere, attempted to fix on something solid, if felt like the entire structure was rearranging itself in small but unsettling ways – the hues altered, the temperatures changed, the ambient lighting slipped out from different angles or slithered away entirely.

'We must move, and keep moving,' Navradaran went on. 'The danger grows the longer we linger in any one location. Inquisitor, I will speak with you now.'

Crowl hobbled over to him like a schola boy asked to recite a litany. Spinoza watched them speak, though she couldn't make out the words. Crowl gestured, his movements awkward, but he was clearly tracing out a route. After just a few moments of that, Navradaran nodded, then looked up again.

'Full armour coverage, weapons ready,' he said. 'Remain close to one of my companions at all times.'

Crowl was staring almost greedily at one of the tunnel entrances, itching to be off. The Custodian, by contrast, radiated an air of distaste. For all his stoicism, this was not a place he relished being in.

'Emperor be with us,' he said bleakly, and they set off again.

Khazad was not immune from the stultifying air of the webway. She had seen and experienced many unsettling things in the company of Phaelias, but nothing quite as suffocating, as uncanny, as this. She felt like her limbs were weighed down with ingots. Her reactions felt dulled, her vision blurred.

This was a bad place. Revus looked to be suffering too, though only someone who knew him well would have detected it. She tried not to look at Crowl too often. The way he was now, the clear deterioration, that was hard to absorb. It gave her doubts where none had previously been. Had he been like this in the Fortress, too? Had she not noticed it then? All the fury she had directed at Spinoza, all the righteous cant about loyalty and oaths… But then, those things still counted for something. Crowl had never wavered in his commitment to this. That had not changed. If this was another test of

loyalty, then the only response was to remain true, to live up to the standards she had accused the others of failing to meet.

She tried to stay focused, keeping the grip on her blade tight. She ignored the wisps of fractured images that danced around the edge of her vision, just like the breath of the spectres that haunted Shoba's ruined cities. She ignored the constant scrape of metal against metal that she could hear whenever she was still, and ignored the stink of old blood that filled her helm's intakes. This was a bad place.

The column passed under one of the lintels and moved back into a long, snaking corridor. After that they made their way down several more passages, through several more junctions, at each intersection pausing to let Navradaran and Crowl make the determination on the route. The tunnels changed in various ways as they travelled. In some, the footing became treacherous, making troopers stagger; in others, all the surfaces were steel-hard. The noises altered, echoing away into nothingness, then coming back muffled, then disintegrating into splinters that might have been laughs, or maybe weeping, or perhaps just the creak of ancient spars flexing against the warp's tides.

It was better not to think about what must have lain just beyond the protection of those curving walls. In some places the diameter of the tunnels shrank to just a few metres, and it was hard to make progress without grazing up against them. In others, the space expanded voluminously, leaving them picking a trail across vast and empty halls that swam with boiling clouds of condensation. The play of light varied too, from a dull gold to a viscous black-purple. The entire complex felt alive, albeit asleep, maybe even dreaming. After long enough inside it, you could start to think that you were just a part of that ancient and continuous dream, and the physical bodies around you just figments of your mind's wandering.

A deep and heavy pall of age hung over the entire place. Although the visible structural elements were mostly untarnished, and in much finer surface condition than the mouldering structures of the Imperium, you could tell, somehow, that their origins stretched impossibly back into time. Every so often a reminder of that antiquity would intrude into the otherwise soporific haze of the place – a shaft that disappeared into nothingness, its edges ragged and crumbling; a half-collapsed roof, leaking foul black smoke-like sludge that pooled and hissed when it met the silver-gold mist.

Most striking of all were the true breaches, the places where the barriers gave out altogether. They never went close to those locations, and the junctions that led to them were heavily overlaid with sigils and warding rune-clusters, but even so, you could catch a far-off glimpse of silhouetted ruins standing starkly before a neon sea of seething distortion, as if the tunnel's structure opened straight out into the raw stuff of the empyrean.

Khazad glanced at her chrono. It gave her a nonsensical reading, its runes spinning wildly. She realised she had absolutely no internal sense of how long they had been walking. Her mind estimated just a short time, but her muscle-sensation, which she guessed was more reliable, indicated many hours.

Then the diffuse light went out, plunging them all abruptly into darkness. Something raced past her, something going incredibly fast, something she couldn't make out the shape of though she felt the air shudder and flex around it. Helm-lumens blazed, filling the interior with shafts of swinging artificial light, and hellguns and lasguns went off in a confused web of shots. Someone was shouting, then screaming, then nothing.

The tunnel's natural lighting returned. Khazad saw a tangle of bodies on the floor. A Custodian stood over them, his guardian spear held ready. Blood was everywhere, smeared up the walls, boiling in the runnels of the ridged floor. Revus had opened fire on something; Spinoza and Zijes were hurrying back from their stations further up the column.

Four lay dead. Three Palatine Sentinels, one of Zijes' storm troopers. In each case, their armour had been penetrated with a single blade strike, sent in deep, artfully arranged – one throat was cut, one heart had been burst, one stomach opened, one skull bisected. The incisions were incredibly precise, even surgical. Khazad doubted she could have cut like that, even given twice as much time to try.

No sign of any attacker remained. Above them, the mists stirred and churned lazily. The faint music could still be made out, its uneasy melodies now sounding increasingly like a mockery.

Devra arrived at the scene, pushing past his own warriors to get there. 'Remain vigilant,' he snapped at those staring at the bodies, forcing them around. He dropped down to the slain, checked briefly for pulses, made the identifications. By the time he had finished, Navradaran was there too. 'Our medicae officer,' Devra told him.

Navradaran flickered a battle-sign message to his companion, who briefly shook his head.

‘Xenos bastards,’ Zijes muttered, looking up and around, angling his own laspistol at shadows.

‘They are formidable,’ said Navradaran. ‘And this is their realm.’ He cast his eyes over the column, checking that they were still formed up. ‘The only defence is preparedness. We keep moving.’

‘Trooper missing,’ said Devra then, having run a quick count.

As soon as he said it, the screaming started. A woman’s screaming, echoing down the tunnels, coming from everywhere and nowhere, impossible to blot out even with their armour’s audex-dampeners. Khazad winced, and other soldiers visibly recoiled. The sound was utterly horrifying – an animal mix of fear and anguish and terror and off-the-scale pain.

‘Ignore it,’ ordered Navradaran grimly. ‘You know why they do it. We keep moving.’

No one stirred. The Sentinels in particular just stood there, transfixed, until Devra started to push them into a stumbling march. Then, one by one, they were all walking again, leaving the dead behind, twitchily pointing their gun-muzzles at any stray shadow or light-flicker.

The screaming never diminished. It followed them, resonating from every surface, transmuting into ever more frantic and desperate crescendos. It wouldn’t stop. How was she not dead yet? Was it even real? It sounded real. Throne above, it sounded very real.

By then, Revus was walking beside her again. ‘Foul,’ he growled, furious.

Foul, but effective. Khazad found herself doing what all the rest were doing – jumping at every tread, imagining them coming back at any moment, trying to put it out of her mind only to end up focusing on it to the exclusion of all else.

They pushed on. Trying to establish the passage of time amid that constant unbroken shriek of agony was even harder, but it felt like a long time.

Then the enemy struck again. The pattern was just the same – a sudden killing of the ambient lighting, a rush of disturbed air, a frantic firefight in the freeze-frame darkness, a slash and glimmer of disruptor-snarling blades, the resumption of visuals with no sign of what had done it.

Three dead, this time. Two carried away. Almost as soon as the lightning raid was over, the screams became overlaid, blending into a tripartite

chorus. It was unbearable. One of the Sentinels cracked, ripping his helm off, clamping his gauntlets over his ears and howling in unbridled horror. Zijes was first to get to him, shaking him, trying to knock him out of the madness. When it wouldn't abate, when the soldier started to froth at the mouth, Zijes placed his pistol to the man's temple and ended the tirade.

There was nothing to say, after that. No sign of the xenos, nothing to be done for any of those attacked, and certainly nothing to be done for those snatched into excruciation.

Khazad began to feel sick. She balled her fists, set her jaw, forced herself to remember the mental disciplines. She was Shoba, a daughter of the dark, killer for the Emperor. Before she started to walk again, she glanced over at the Custodians. One of them sent a brief battle-sign message to Navradaran, just as before. She didn't understand it, but it had a similar form to the Inquisition gesture for *Nearly*.

The march started up again, with every sinew now tight, every heart hammering too fast. If the tunnel had not been filled with amplified screaming, Khazad would have been able to hear every one of her comrades murmuring catechisms, trying to dredge up strength from the words of faith.

She shoved the ongoing noise from her consciousness, immersed herself instead in old litanies of hatred and vengeance. She ceased to pay close attention to her surroundings, instead visualised an enemy in isolation, focused on that, conjuring up an image from imagination and rehearsing her killing it, hurting it, slicing it apart, breaking it open and grinding its sadistic features under her heel.

Revus was doing much the same, she could tell. He'd stopped trying to blot out the noise and was instead concentrating on it, transmuting his horror into hatred.

Good work, she thought. *Admirable resolve.*

When the xenos came again, there was no surprise at all. From the instant that the lights blew she sprang into action, not trying to lock on to anything solid, not trying to spy it, just enacting the kill of her imagination, flashing up her blade into the place where an enemy *ought* to be. The hellguns flashed and snapped, the Custodians reacted even faster, and something, somewhere managed to connect.

The lights did not return. A voice screeched – not human this time, but a high-pitched, keening wail that chilled the blood almost as much as the

human scream-chorus that was still in full flow. Khazad spun towards the sound, negotiating the labyrinth of criss-crossing helm lumen-beams and staying low to evade the panicked las-fire. Revus came with her – had it been his shot that had connected? – and the two of them found themselves nearly colliding with the giant outline of one of the Custodians.

He had caught it. He had the xenos pinned to the ground, his guardian spear punched clean through the creature's midriff and into the substance of the tunnel below. It was writhing like a spider against the blade, its glossy black limbs thrashing, its milk-pale face contorted into vile and inhuman shapes. Khazad poised to leap, to shove her sword straight through its hateful, scrawny throat.

'Stay!' The command came from Navradaran, who had hurried over and now stood between her and the xenos. The rest of the column huddled around, some staring in fascination at the pinned thing, others aiming their weapons outward into the dark in case others arrived. Zijes, Spinoza and Devra frantically hauled any observers back and ensured a defensive line was placed around them all. Soon a tight thicket of lasguns and blades were angled in all directions, every trigger pressed taut and ready to fire.

The screaming still continued. Khazad angled herself to get a better view. The creature was unspeakably repulsive – too thin, too spindly, its skin translucent and with black veins visibly pulsing. Its mouth was a lipless slit exposing metallic teeth, its eyes were black pits, its nose hooked and leaking blood. It stank of offal and cruelty.

The Custodian who had pinned it maintained his stance, leaning into the spear to prevent it getting up. Navradaran knelt down heavily, crushing its free hand under his weight to ensure it couldn't reach for a weapon.

'Thillaranna ne'shoelna,' he said. *'Asuryin'el shanaaer.'*

The xenos looked shocked by that, and didn't respond immediately. Khazad watched it move, struggling against its pin. The clothing it wore was ridiculous – a skintight mesh of light-eating fabric that only covered portions of its flesh, leaving the rest exposed and vulnerable. It looked more female than male, though its extreme slimness made it hard to tell for sure. It had a knot of blood-red hair, extensive tattoos. Its muscles were knotted and gristle-hard under a semi-transparent skin. For all its extreme flair and poise, the wasted creature looked more like a victim of rad-poisoning than a living soul.

‘Ashav’iel govnannien,’ it croaked, black blood leaking down its chin. It smiled maliciously, and shook its head. *‘Khaina vel tescainne.’*

‘Shovainn. Sho anna-avata. Ashva helaith arais.’ Navradaran turned to look at Crowl, who had emerged through the knot of bodies. ‘It tells us that we shall all be taken, one by one, and made into pain-food for its masters.’

Crowl, the only one of them not to be fully helmed, looked like he wanted to vomit. His limbs were trembling. In the fractured play of light on dark, it was impossible not to notice how alike their faces were now, him and the xenos.

As soon as the creature laid eyes on Crowl, though, something changed. It looked horrified, then fascinated. A black tongue flickered out, licking across its thin lips.

‘Arva,’ it rasped. *‘Arva maliendrith.’*

Crowl got closer. He, too, seemed torn between fascination and revulsion. ‘No, no, you won’t,’ he said. ‘You will take us to where the others are.’

It laughed at him, spurting up more blood. But then it looked unsure. And then it looked scared.

‘You sense it, don’t you?’ Crowl murmured. He shuffled closer, as if he wanted the xenos to smell him. ‘You sense it.’

It tried to wriggle away, but the Custodian held it firm.

‘I could end it here,’ Navradaran said. ‘Eliminate the threat.’

‘No, no, *niente,*’ said Crowl. ‘Let it go. Let it run.’ Then he addressed it again directly. ‘Look at me, beast. Look at me. See this? See the mark? You know what I am. Take us to Raskian. Take us to the pain-bringer.’

The Custodian made no move. In the background, the screams continued to ring out. The xenos tried to smirk, then looked disorientated, then stared at Crowl in something like anxious disbelief. Its moods seemed to cycle with extreme rapidity, a whirl of intense feeling that it could barely control, let alone conceal.

Khazad held her breath. Navradaran himself hesitated. Eventually, though, he gave the nod. The Custodian wrenched the spear-point clear in a spurt of fresh blood.

The xenos crouched for a split second longer, static, limbs curled, breathing heavily, staring from one hostile face to the other.

Then it was gone, leaping up into the mist-clouds like a snatched strip of black fabric, a blur of speed, its stink pungent but its visible presence gone.

Navradaran looked at Crowl. Crowl got up slowly. The blood on the floor, some human, some alien, simmered gently in the webway's strange air.

'I do not–' Navradaran began.

But then the screaming stopped, cut off as if a knife had been drawn in perfect coordination across multiple throats. The tunnel's interior regained its shifting eldritch glow, the mist began to churn and swirl around them as before. The faint music became audible again, soft chimes that tinkled as if brushed by an otherworldly wind.

'We can walk, now,' Crowl said, swallowing distastefully, then wiping his mouth. 'The way is clear.'

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Revus thought he might have shot it. Not by design – he was aiming virtually blind – but maybe through luck. Or it might have been hit by one of the flurry of las-bolts aimed in a virtual panic by many other troopers. Or maybe it had been Khazad. Or maybe it had been none of them, and the Custodian had managed to bring it down alone.

Whatever the truth, the immediate horror was ended. The tunnels reverted back to their previous state – a world of low-level dread, of strange scraps of semi-formed images that lingered for a moment before splitting into snarls of mist. The smell was beginning to make him nauseous.

As the column marched on, he carefully placed himself next to Gereg, who was breathing too hard and too fast. ‘Focus, trooper,’ he murmured, voice low enough so that only Gereg would hear. ‘You will control this. You will overcome it. The Emperor lends the strength you need.’

Further up, Revus saw Channa, half-masked by the shifting mist, doing the same thing. Devra was also a good officer, and was no doubt working to keep his Sentinels moving. Things were febrile, becoming more so, but discipline had not broken yet.

Gereg’s breathing became less frantic. Revus heard him mouthing litanies

of commitment and hatred to himself, and that was a reassurance.

Spinoza was marching just up ahead, Gorgias hovering at her shoulder. Both of them seemed to have positioned themselves near enough to Crowl to observe, without moving close enough to confer. Revus picked up the pace a little to join her.

'We have a destination yet?' he asked her.

Spinoza offered a half-shrug. 'He has been speaking to the Custodians. He sounds confident.'

Revus couldn't tell what she thought of that. Her voice was tight and guarded, though that was hardly surprising. The question he wanted to ask – *How does he know the way?* – he left unsaid. 'Have you spoken to the other one?'

'Zijes? Not yet. He has his hands full shooting our own people, it seems.' She shook her head dismissively. 'You will stay close to me, captain. You and the assassin. This party is already fractured, with too many motives yet to become clear.'

'Understood.'

'We discussed contingencies. They remain in force. Devra's allegiance will be to the Custodians, Zijes is the uncertain element. When you can, take soundings from Channa. If we can rely on her, even in part, that helps.'

Revus nodded. He was about to ask a final question, but then the environment around them started to change at last. He looked up, and noticed a shift in the hazy lighting – it was getting darker.

'Here we go,' said Spinoza ominously. 'The Custodians have sensed something.'

The tunnel roof started to rise, the open space on either side of them to increase. Flickers of something new, stray barbs of static electricity perhaps, started to slide over the ridged walls. The faint music was replaced by a deeper, more rhythmic beat, like a gigantic heart pumping somewhere far below. They passed obelisks carved with warding runes, first a couple, then many more. The structure of the tunnel walls became more complex – a web of tendrils and spurs, weaving with one another to form an intricate mesh. Eventually, they found themselves walking across the base of a high-arched chamber towards what was unmistakably a gate. It resembled the portal on Luna somewhat, though without the Mechanicus crust of additional machinery. The clouds of condensation clustered around it,

snaking up the long, smooth supports before tumbling over the high apex, though the way through it was opaque.

Guards stood in front of the gate, around forty of them. They were skitarii, dressed in crimson robes with a rose-gold trim. They looked larger and more capable than the ones who had been at the compound, and carried electro-staves and volkite devices. Their faces were entirely hidden behind armoured masks, and under their heavy robes only glints of metal were visible.

Their commander waited for Navradaran to come to him. This one was a monster of burnished brass and iron plates, not much shorter than the Custodian, and just as ornate.

When it spoke, its voice was that unsettling amalgam of human and artificial, the timbre mediated to a passionless inflection by all the devices lodged in what remained of its mortal jawline.

‘Ephoroi,’ it said, bowing fractionally. ‘Our hosts made us aware of your presence.’

‘I would speak to your master.’

The skitarius turned its multiple green lenses to the rest of the party. ‘And these are?’

‘Members of the Holy Orders of the Emperor’s Inquisition. You will let them pass too.’

For a moment the Martian did not reply, no doubt conferring over a private link. Then it stood aside.

‘The Fabricator General awaits within.’

They passed through the gate. Just as before, crossing the barrier meant crossing into an entirely new environment. Their surroundings switched from an eldritch world of mists and music and reverted to a standard Imperial type. The floors were slabs of rockcrete, the walls were prefabricated squares of plasteel. Sodium lumens hung overhead, casting a weak yellow light across pitted and rust-pocked surfaces. The floral stench disappeared, replaced by the more familiar odours of recycled air, chem-filters and faulty drainage. The layout of the complex felt familiar, too – standard for an Adeptus Terra outpost in hostile or contested territory, the sort of thing the Navy could void-lift in and then guard against attack.

They were guided past numerous chambers, all linked by the same largely featureless corridors. Some rooms had tech-priests and skitarii working in

them, others were filled with heavy cogitator units. The place was busy – servitors and servo-skulls lurched and buzzed around, and behind many closed slide doors the sounds of machinery grinding and hissing away could be made out.

They reached an octagonal intersection chamber with multiple openings leading further into the complex. The lead skitarius stopped and turned to address Navradaran.

'Your troops will come no further. The Fabricator General grants audience only to the Custodians and the two inquisitors.'

'And Spinoza,' insisted Crowl.

The skitarius paused again, then gave his assent. 'This way. For the others, in there.'

Revus watched Spinoza, Crowl and the Custodians go. Gorgias, for some reason, went with them too, perhaps because he was seen by the Mechanicus as Crowl's personal accessory.

After they had been ushered away, the remaining skitarii guided the rest of them down a different corridor. They were all shown into a single large room, a holding chamber with metal-framed cots, hygiene stations and ration-bar dispensers. The place even had windows, though when the shutters were up they showed nothing but black through the frames – not the black of the void, not a painted surface, but a complete absence of visual information, something that was difficult to look at for too long.

The skitarii left them. One by one, the troopers slowly looked around, pulled their packs off, sat heavily on the edge of the cots.

Khazad came up to him. 'They made it like home,' she said.

That was exactly right – *like* home. The more you looked, the more you noticed the strange touches. The windows onto nothing. The over-regular flicker of the lumens. The deep, soft organic thrum that reverberated up from the floors, something that you never heard on Terra.

'Then they must wish to keep us alive,' Revus said sourly. 'For now.'

Crowl felt drowsy, his mind fogged up. This place was a halfway house, a strange compromise, a messy kingdom of merged heritage. As soon as he had crossed the threshold, he had noticed the change – the dampening, the dilution. Jarrod had told him about some of his suppositions, which were now confirmed.

‘They create… *realms* within the network,’ Jarrod had told him, seemingly an age ago now. ‘Pockets of stability. How long they last, I do not know.’

Presumably, this was one such pocket, a place created for this singular purpose. Humans could breathe the air in here without trouble. They could walk in standard grav. The scale was human, as was the styling of the physical apparatus. Crowl could still sense the underlying perversion, its rotten foundations, but could no longer see them.

The xenos were here, though. They were everywhere. Just… not visible.

Navradaran said nothing to him as they walked. It might have been Crowl’s imagination, but the Custodian’s preternatural certainty – always so complete before – seemed to have deserted him now. He still spoke with his old calm authority, but Crowl could detect the thread of concern underneath. Navradaran had already told him that he wasn’t here to end the Project. Not necessarily. It needed to be investigated, scoped out, its parameters established in order to determine whether it was a threat or something to be encouraged. In that, he was just like Spinoza, and – for all he knew – the other inquisitor who had been dragged into this. They were still prepared to wait, to dig a little, to see if their worries could somehow be assuaged.

Fools. Dupes. The evidence of catastrophe was all around them, plain as the galaxy’s hot heart, and still they pressed on with their doubts, adding up the numbers, preparing their documents for review. The truth would out, though. They would come round, sooner or later, for a xenos mask might be artful, but it would always slip.

The agony was worse. It had abated a little, out in the webway, but now the sharp pain in his joints was almost enough to make tears start in his desiccated eyes. The last of his old medicae supplies were long gone, and those Revus had tried to give him were no longer effective against this level of degeneration. He could even visualise it now – his blood thinning out, his bones becoming brittle, his skin flaking and cracking. It hadn’t always been that way. He could still dimly remember a time when his body had been as much of a weapon as his mind. Even very recently he had been able to fight, to wield Sanguine, to summon up some of that old fluidity. Not now. He was sliding down the steep slope into the void, and could almost see its base rising up to meet him.

Spinoza said nothing to him any more. He sensed she was tortured,

wishing to recover some kind of understanding between them, but there had been no time. He wondered if the chance would ever come, now – where were they likely to find themselves alone, in this place, without something urgent to keep them busy?

He felt suddenly sorry for her. She too was beginning to show the signs of her Terran service – the greying pallor, the chapped lips – but was still so young. If she could just shake off her dogmatism, cultivate a proper sense of scepticism, she could yet be formidable.

Then again, what kind of a role model was he? A parochial inquisitor, a career spent rooting out petty weakness of character in the slums of a failing world, just one of dozens on Terra alone, leaving a legacy neither of blood nor accomplishment. He had missed the chance to escape a long time ago. Now he was stuck here, alone in his terminal sickness, surrounded by doubters and his story nearing its end.

He smiled. Oh, the self-pity.

The party reached a large pair of slide doors guarded by skitarii. Their guide raised its staff, and the panels slid open.

Beyond the doorway was another large chamber, very dark, its floor hidden under an ankle-deep carpet of deep green vapour. Once inside, Crowl could see that the pretensions on Imperial design had been foregone entirely here. The walls were a patchwork of semi-open pipework and valve-systems, all ticking and venting with metronomic precision. Spectral hololiths danced and jerked in the gloom. Tech-priests, all of them extremely far removed from default human shapes, glided and limped through the vapour, their trailing mass of dendrites clattering over metallic floor panels. The space was uncomfortably hot, pungent with the aroma of machine-part lubricants and sacred oils. A low dirge sounded from the chamber’s far corner, coming from a hunched figure whose visible face under its cowl seemed to be entirely comprised of a vox-emitter. Heavy chimes went off at regular intervals, triggered by something unseen amid the intricate mass of ironwork that lined the chamber’s walls.

None of the priests so much as turned to address the new arrivals. They shuffled around tracing ritual patterns, their passage attended by puffs of incense from gilt-edged servo-skulls. Only one figure remained still – a diminutive robed individual waiting silently at the very centre of the chamber. It wore blood-red robes, very thick and fine, draped over a

lumpen, misshapen body. It had two faces – one withered and decayed, a few slivers of black flesh hanging from a filigree of iron, the other, set above it, a bronze mask of idealised perfection with emerald eyes and burnished cheeks. Its two visible hands were silvered claws hanging below the sleeves of its gown.

The skitarius halted before the figure, bowed, then addressed the gathering for a final time before withdrawing into the murk. ‘The Prime Instrument of the Omnissiah’s Will,’ it announced. ‘The Magos Mechanicus. The Fabricator General of the Forges of Mars. His Magnificence, Oud Oudia Raskian.’

Crowl immediately doubted that the slight, almost dwarfish character in front of him could possibly be the Fabricator General. He had heard solid rumours that the High Lord was so far down the path of mechanical improvement that his physical form had become grotesquely large, embodied in giant storage modules that took truly immense energy to move around, so much so that he rarely left the Red Planet at all.

It was only then that he saw the long tangle of cables running from the dwarf’s back, piled up under its robes then strewn out across the floor behind. These cables looped up with others, gathering in girth and complexity like a vast, coiled serpent before splaying out again to interface with hundreds of nodes set into the chamber’s rear wall. He realised then that the wall *was* Raskian. All those stacked energy converters and power coils and wheezing oxygen purifiers were what his original body had morphed into, slowly, over hundreds of years, one element at a time, until he was now the chamber that surrounded them.

What possible advantage could that have given him, tied up and interlocked with linked cogitator boxes so huge and heavy that he would never be able to move under his own power again? Was he like some insect queen, bloated and grotesque at the heart of a nest, forever attended to by slave-workers for just as long as he produced the goods? Were his original organs still buried somewhere in that piled-up cluster of formidably amalgamated devices, quivering in vials of fluid as the synapse-fuses fired around them? Or were they, too, gone now, replaced by ever-more-perfect technological replacements that ticked rather than oozed? Crowl would have liked to have asked him. He would have liked to have spent time alone with him, for so long now the object of his lonely hunt.

Impressive and repulsive at the same time. Very Martian.

‘High Lord,’ said Navradaran, bowing. ‘I am relieved to find you functioning fully and in optimal condition.’

Something in Raskian’s original face-remnant twitched. ‘You dared much to come here, Ephoroi,’ the High Lord said. His voice emanated from the wall behind the dwarf, and was as rich and nuanced as his servants’ were tinny and filtered. Perhaps that was what the luxury of space gave him – entire subsystems devoted to perfect replication of the human inflection range. ‘I am impressed.’

‘The merit – or blame – lies at the feet of Inquisitor Crowl, whom you see before you. He is accompanied by Interrogator Spinoza and Inquisitor Zijes, all of the Ordo Hereticus.’

The Fabricator General’s bronze mask never moved, but Crowl could tell they were all being scrutinised, probably in parallel and by more than one auspex system.

‘The Inquisition,’ said Raskian, amused. ‘Then I am a heretic, is that it?’

Navradaran didn’t miss a beat. ‘That is yet to be proved. I am here, initially, to listen.’

The wall of machinery behind the dwarf let off a gout of high-pressure steam, and a series of valves released in sequence. A laugh? Probably not. The temptation to anthropomorphise the heaps of ironwork at the dwarf’s back was overwhelming.

‘To listen.’ The dwarf’s hands twitched, and a series of very high-resolution hololiths began to construct themselves on either side of it. They were by far the best projections Crowl had ever seen – almost completely opaque, beautifully rendered, like a projection of reality conjured up out of thin air. ‘I will not insult your intelligence by asking how you discovered this scheme, or to what level of detail you are aware of its operations. I shall assume that you understand why I am here in this place. I shall also assume that you do not understand the primary set of concerns that were the genesis of the mission. I shall enlighten you in full, now, and conclude with the unanswerable case for action. Then you can judge what counts as heresy, and what does not.’

The hololiths firmed up further, tracing out some kind of astonishingly complex three-dimensional mechanism lit internally with false light-sources and translucencies. Crowl’s first impression was that it was the interior of a

city, a cross-section of a hive-spire with all its many thousands of levels and internal machinery. The viewpoint zoomed in steadily, delving deep through system after system. It quickly became hard to follow, let alone interpret – an unfolding world of colossal and impenetrable detail, fused and melded and augmented until the mind itself began to rebel against the abundance of information.

'This is the Golden Throne,' the dwarf said. 'Its outer reaches, less than a kilometre below ground. Most of what you are seeing here was put in place around four thousand years ago, during the tenure of Uixot. It counts as among the more recent of the major additions. As you can see, the bulk of these regions are composed of supplementary energy coils, coupled to psychically resonant channellers.'

Energy coils. Holy Terra, but those things were vast. Crowl had been shown the reactors at the base of a big hive-spire once, and had been impressed, but these things, if the projections were to be believed, were on another scale entirely.

The hololiths kept on zooming in, accelerating now, hurtling through the layers. If you lost your focus, you could easily imagine that you were physically lost inside that maze of dizzyingly unfolding layers, caught in a race to the heart of it and buried deep beyond any possible help.

'These are the Pre-Apostasy strata,' Raskian intoned. 'Some of the most extensive works since foundation. Again, observe the energy ducts. The lesson you will be taking – power requirements, of all kinds, have increased exponentially since the Throne's creation.'

Crowl blinked hard, feeling his eyes watering. Every so often he caught sight of gantries, tunnels, bridges, all flying by, and only then could he start to put a scale on what he was seeing. The style of construction was changing now, getting older, stranger, involving terraces of devices he had no name for.

'This is now close to what your people, Custodian, think of as the Throne-room proper, though still far from the core chamber. We are within two millennia of its foundation. Very few of the systems here are replicable in this era, and their origins are mostly lost, though integrity of function remains high.'

The viewpoint bored down further. It hadn't slowed yet, and *still* the microscopic level of detail kept flying by. Then, slowly, gradually, the pace

started to slow.

‘Now we near the heart of it. This is, according to the ancient scrolls, the limit of the original machine-specification. We are a long way below ground now, far beyond the reach of standard augurs, though of course nominal surface level has risen considerably since the inception of these works. The core chamber itself is within a kilometre of this location.’

The viewpoint finally ground to a halt. The hololiths displayed a static image of the Throne’s innards. Very little of what Crowl was seeing made any kind of sense to him. Some of the clusters might have been junctions for huge energy cables, other sections looked like heat exchangers, but it was a dense mess, a hyper-concentrated accretion of different tech-bundles and modules, all interconnected through a cat’s cradle of wires and psy-bridges and conductors. None of it looked like Imperial technology. Not in the slightest. It was a melange, a tech-maelstrom, a crunched-together collision of a thousand different chassis styles, object phenotypes and machine-
schemata.

‘This region,’ the dwarf said, ‘has a name. It is called the Areopeia Junction. The significance of the term has been lost. Its core function, however, is broadly understood. The bulk of the devices in this region enable the Throne – by which I now mean the seat itself, the prime interface – to tolerate the imposition of an occupant of mortal dimensions and physical limitations. If these mechanisms were to fail, that function would cease, and the occupant – any occupant of such a nature – would be unable to retain contact with the interface.’

‘What do you mean, *mortal?*’ asked Zijes, the tone of suspicious outrage giving away the real meat of the query.

‘Please do not impose your religious convictions on this discussion, inquisitor,’ the dwarf said calmly. ‘Much of what I will say now will offend you. I ask that you refrain from comment until I have completed the survey.’ As the Fabricator General spoke, a small part of the hololith was illuminated. Crowl had no idea of the scale – the lit section might have been a few metres across, or maybe a hundred, or maybe a kilometre. ‘This is a component of the Junction. You may recognise the style of the insertion. It is non-metallic in construction, immensely strong, resistant to most forms of moulding and recasting. It is psychically charged, and forms an integral

part of the region's material function.' The viewpoint moved a little closer, zeroing in on the illumination component. 'Observe the markings on the casing, here.'

The markings were runes. Not Gothic runes, not even archaic Terran.

'Impossible,' said Spinoza.

'On the contrary,' said the dwarf. 'The deeper one delves, the more such inscriptions one finds. Some are of unknown provenance. Some are beyond our ability to parse. The Throne itself, the physical object that forms the core of the entire machine, is certainly not of human origin. Hence the need, we hypothesise, for a subsystem to mediate between it and the occupant.'

By then both Zijes and Spinoza were becoming outraged, having to work to hold in their fury, as if a foul and offensive jest were being played at their expense. The Custodians remained impassive. Crowl, though, felt a sudden spark of excitement – a thrill of recognition, of realisation, of confirmation.

'Of course,' he said out loud, without intending to.

The dwarf ignored him. 'We are unable to remedy the faults in this system. It is failing, becoming less efficient despite the increase in power being fed into the greater machine, and no investigation we have conducted has produced a remedy.'

'How long have you been investigating this?' asked Navradaran.

'Five hundred and thirty-seven years, standard Terran. We are no nearer to a solution than we were at the outset. In the meantime, the component continues to degrade. We estimate total failure within a century or two, in the best case. Within a decade, in the worst case.'

The dwarf let that sink in. No one spoke for a while. The hololith glittered before them.

'And if it fails?' the Custodian asked. 'What then?'

The dwarf did not reply immediately. Even for a creature that had spent a lifetime purging emotion from itself, saying the actual words seemed difficult.

'The end,' it said eventually, its voice as empty as the frigid gulf between the stars. 'The end of everything.'

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Khazad immediately felt the old sense of being caged. The chamber they had been sent to was large enough to accommodate them all, possibly for some time, but the ceiling was low and the walls felt like they pressed in close and the air was stale and already smelled bad.

Their skitarii escorts had not followed them inside, though she was not foolish enough to believe that they were not being listened to remotely. All those gathered inside went warily, speaking in low voices, carefully eating or drinking but keeping their weapons close to hand.

Soon after arrival, Khazad and the three Imperial officers had conversed briefly. The horror of the journey through the webway was still raw, even for her, and so the conversation felt clipped and awkward.

‘The Lord Navradaran will make his decision,’ said Devra. ‘Until then, we wait.’

‘Agreed,’ said Channa.

‘But we can use the time,’ said Revus, looking disappointed in his opposite number. ‘Test the boundaries, probe for weakness.’

‘To what end?’ asked Channa.

‘Because these people are not our friends,’ said Khazad forcefully.

‘We here may not be the most powerful of those who entered,’ said Revus, agreeing, ‘but we are the most numerous. We have no idea how strong this Mechanicus detachment is – it would be good to find out more.’

Channa looked uncertain, Devra unconvinced.

‘Do not be concerned,’ Revus said.

‘Only two needed,’ said Khazad.

Revus shot her a smile. ‘Yes, only two.’

That ended the discussion. The bulk of the troopers did what they could to unclamp their wound-tight muscles, rest up, try to get their minds working again. Channa sent two of her troops to the exit doors to request medicae supplies from the skitarii guards – something to keep them busy.

At the same time, Revus and Khazad withdrew to the far corner of the chamber, behind the rows of bunks and supply crates.

‘This was not designed as a prison,’ Revus said, running his hands up against the wall panels and worming his fingers into the joints, which gave a little.

Khazad nodded. ‘Hasty work. They never expected guests.’

They worked quickly, not risking an auspex scan but using their own eyes to scan for faults. Revus clambered up onto the nearest top bunk and pressed both hands up against a ceiling panel. The first one was bolted on firmly. The second cracked upward under pressure.

‘Assistance, if you please,’ he said.

Khazad vaulted up to join him. Revus drew out his combat knife and prised at the joints while Khazad teased the clasps free where they were exposed. A few moments later, the panel came loose, hanging on one edge. Revus levered it up into the void above, took a quick look to check there wasn’t anything nasty on the far side, then hoisted himself up into the space. Khazad followed. Once inside, she carefully let the panel down behind her, leaving just a single clasp unclipped to mark it.

They were in a cramped void just above the chamber’s ceiling. A few atmosphere-system pipes ran around them, plus power lines and what appeared to be the rudiments of an anti-flamm array. Headroom was very tight – they had to crawl on their stomachs, gauging the way ahead with helm-lumens only. Khazad soon found herself sweating – the further they went, the more the humidity seemed to get close to what it had been in the webway.

They made their way past where the chamber's walls must have been, feeling a path over the corridor below. At any moment, she expected to trip some alarm or pick up the attention of an auspex-bearing servo-skull. She kept her breathing under control, made her way as carefully as she could. Her thin armour was an advantage over Revus' heavier carapace plate, but both of them had to work to avoid snagging on pipework and section-joints.

Eventually they reached a more open area dominated by a junction box for the atmosphere processors. The machinery hummed loudly around them. They began to get a rough feel for the size and extent of the complex.

It didn't seem to be very large – maybe a kilometre square at the most, all arranged on what appeared to be a single storey. It had been assembled hastily from prefabricated sections. Although several aspects of the construction were odd, there were no visible signs of xenos work, nor the telltale acrid smell left by their presence – the Mechanicus had built it.

Revus halted for a moment by the junction box, waiting for Khazad to reach him. He sent her battle-sign in the dark.

Up ahead, bearing right. Nearing perimeter?

She shuffled forward, narrowing her eyes in the gloom. *Affirmative*, she signed. *Access tight – I will lead.*

The crawl-space got very cramped after that, and she went more slowly, careful not to snag on the exposed structural edges. She found herself worming down an incline, as if she were caught between the ceiling and a descending roofline, before reaching a blank wall of rockcrete blocks at its base. She reached out to touch them, and felt heat coming through from the other side. The construction, like elsewhere, looked shoddy – it had been thrown up quickly, this place. She edged along the wall's face, feeling for gaps. After a while, she found one – a narrow slit, no more than a finger's width wide, filled with crumbling mortar that she was able to work loose.

Revus, breathing heavily in the tight confines, crawled down to join her, handing her an auspex bead from his armour-collar. She inserted it into the gap and activated the visual field.

After a swirl of static as the machine-spirit found its range, the two of them found themselves staring down another tunnel. This one looked much more like the webway constructs, though, with the blocky structures of the Mechanicus enclosure replaced with now-familiar xenos curves and sweeps.

Khazad adjusted the viewing angle, exposing more xenos material. It appeared that the Imperial compound was entirely enclosed in a much larger xenos construction, like a fist cupping a stone. The alien structure resembled something like bone marrow – a honeycomb of smooth holes bored out of the unreflective surface material, perhaps in place to protect them from the webway's naked malice.

Down-left, Revus signed, and Khazad adjusted the angle again.

They picked up the first signs of movement. A long way ahead, part screened by the perforated wall-sweeps, xenos were moving. Most of them looked the same as the warrior they had encountered in the webway – lithe, tall figures in skintight garb and carrying wickedly barbed blades. Among them, though, something else limped along, something cloaked and hooded, its back curved over obscenely tightly, its thin hands clutching at weapons, or maybe medicae instruments, or maybe machine tools. The others seemed either respectful of fearful of that one, and hung back from it as they walked. The warriors were foul enough, but even displayed on a pixelated auspex-feed, the hunched creature was utterly repulsive, a misshapen, motley collection of pins and vials and claws and hooks that moved itself entirely unnaturally, as if it were hobbling across the deck on a mix of grav-plates and broken ankles.

Then it stopped moving, lifted its bony head.

Shut down, Revus snapped, and Khazad immediately complied. She pulled the auspex bead from the gap, and the both of them squirmed up and away from the wall.

After they had put some distance between them and the enclosure's edge, the two of them stopped moving. Revus looked at Khazad in the dark, their faces close.

'What do you think?' he asked.

'They are all around us,' she whispered back. 'But these walls are weak. We could break out.'

Revus slowly nodded. 'Maybe do some damage.'

Khazad grinned. 'Give them hell.'

He grinned back. 'Aye, that would be good.'

Khazad stored the auspex footage away securely. 'But not now.'

Then they started crawling upwards again, back to the doubtful safety of the holding chamber, away from the nightmares that circled in the dark

outside.

The hololith gently faded out of view. Crowl blinked again, working hard to adjust to his surroundings as reality re-established itself. The large and complex chamber around them, which had felt imposing before, now felt like a beggar's shack compared to what he had just witnessed.

'Know this,' the dwarf said, its voice the very paragon of reasonableness. 'If any solution existed, if any means of repair were available to us, we would have taken it. The greater part of my realm has been occupied with this one task for many mortal generations, sparing no expense of time or effort, and we have had, at last, to confront the truth. We cannot do it. We did not make it, and we do not understand it. So we have been forced, against our every inclination, to come to those who know more.'

Of all of them, Zijes seemed to be having the hardest time now. It was as if he had never truly believed what Spinoza had told him, thinking it all a means to escape censure from Arx, but now it was true, and it was real, and it was all rushing at him at once, and he could finally see just what had been going on.

'What have you *given* them?' he demanded, restraining himself, it seemed, from flying at the dwarf and putting his hands around its piston-thick neck. 'What have you *done?*'

'Nothing,' said the dwarf. 'Negotiations have been extensive. We have been in this place for many weeks, attempting to reach an accommodation.'

'But something is on the table,' said Crowl. 'You've made them an offer.'

The dwarf's silver hand twitched, and a hololith of a star system spun into view. Nine planets orbited a single sun, each one marked with glowing runic data.

'The Kirill IX System,' the dwarf said. 'Nineteen billion souls. One major forge world, eight tithe-grade Imperial settlements. It is currently under the protection of the Red Talons Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. If agreement is reached here, that protection will be withdrawn, the system's defences removed.'

Spinoza shook her head, outraged. Zijes, much the same. Navradaran did not react. Crowl, though, managed a dry snort of contempt.

'Nineteen billion souls,' he said, shaking his head. 'Just like that.'

'We argued extensively against the xenos' original demands,' the dwarf

said. ‘Those were considerably higher.’

‘Oh, *well done*.’ Crowl felt his disgust threaten to choke him like acid reflux. ‘How *noble*. How *just.* And yet how very, very stupid.’ He glanced over at Navradaran, appealing to the Custodian’s sense. ‘How many worlds do these xenos filth raid every year? And we are to believe that they have become willing to intervene to our benefit for the paltry addition of one more.’

‘It is against the Lex,’ Navradaran told Raskian, ‘to willingly surrender any part of the Emperor’s domains to an enemy.’

‘Perhaps you did not completely understand the point I made earlier,’ said the dwarf. ‘Should the Throne fail, we shall not lose a single system. We shall lose all systems. Everything.’

‘And you can provide proof of this?’ the Custodian pressed. ‘Not just illustrations – technical data?’

‘Readily. Everything we know is available to you in this place.’ One of the dwarf’s cables shivered, as if a frantic series of data-pulses had just been sent down it. ‘But understand this also. The xenos, though vile and contemptible, are not fools. They know it is the Imperium of Man that alone holds back the tides of unreality. They will extract a price for their cooperation, as much for the sake of their pride as anything, but they have no interest in seeing us eradicated.’ The dwarf hesitated, as if weighing up how to express the thought. ‘They are parasites. They are conscious of the requirement for a living host.’

‘That cannot be the extent of it,’ said Crowl.

Something clicked deep within Raskian’s wall of valves then, as if in exasperation. ‘We have undertaken, of course, to make elements of the Throne’s machine-organic interface available to the xenos technicians, to ensure that the replacement system functions adequately. We have provided limited schematics of the areas immediately proximate, to ward against possible component-rejection. That is the extent of it – the minimum necessary for us, and them, to be certain of success. All these details can be made available. There is nothing to hide.’

‘But you *have* been hiding,’ objected Spinoza. ‘You have used deception and violence to hide the entire scheme. If this were truly the only way, why not go to the Council? Bring the entire weight of the Senatorum to bear on the crisis?’

‘Because agreement could never have been reached,’ the dwarf said flatly. ‘Intensive psycho-political analysis of the composition of the current Council and its administrators indicated that only two High Lords would ever have supported an action of this kind. The rest would have shut the initiative down immediately, being either unwilling to believe the facts of the matter or unable to countenance the solution. A protracted battle would have followed, rendering the Imperium paralysed in the face of other existential threats, delaying action for decades. It was a risk that could not be taken, given the possibility of imminent collapse. The three members of the Council in favour of attempting a remedy – myself, the Speaker of the Chartist Captains and the Master of the Astronomican – resolved, after lengthy negotiation, to proceed in secret.’

Crowl laughed again, though his throat was drying out badly and he really needed to take some rest – the longer he spent in this place, the more he felt like passing out. ‘That may be so, in part,’ he rasped. ‘But I have another explanation. The Throne is your charge. Your realm of expertise. And you can’t fix it. That’s a better reason, is it not, to keep this all under wraps? In case your incompetence were ever to be uncovered for all to see?’

The dwarf didn’t appear fazed. ‘You are welcome to entertain that supposition, if you so wish. It is false. We acted in the only way we judged would secure the continued operation of the machine. Though you appear to wish failure on this enterprise, all has unfolded according to our forecasts. We are within sight of an agreement. Our hosts are able to assist. The components in question shall be repaired. The xenos shall be given the minimum necessary by way of payment, in order to save face. The Imperium shall endure. The Omnissiah shall be preserved for eternity for the continuance of His divine work.’

It was almost certainly Crowl’s imagination, but for a split second he could have sworn that the bronze mask smiled at him.

‘As I outlined, all supplementary evidence shall be made available to you,’ Raskian said. ‘But this is a courtesy, not a necessity. The labour has already been performed. The decisions already made. It cannot be stopped now. You have arrived here, inquisitor, not as a participant, but as a spectator.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

That was the limit of what Raskian was prepared to discuss, at least for the time being. He needed, so he said, to prepare for the imminent and final summit on the matter. Just as promised, servitors lumbered into the chamber bearing heavy stacks of data-slates and rolls of parchment, all made available for the party to peruse.

Navradaran, courteous as ever, thanked him, and said that he would scrutinise the materials before coming to a conclusion. A note of warning underpinned his words – that Raskian should not consider the matter closed unless he made the same determination. All the same, no stop was put on the preparations for what would presumably be the decisive meeting between High Lord and xenos.

The party withdrew to a separate area, one cleared of tech-priests and other Mechanicus servants. It was a librarium of sorts, a network of interconnected chambers lined with cogitators and picter-lenses. The stacks of evidence were placed on a series of metal tables across a number of the rooms. Once the doors were shut, Navradaran's companions immediately started to filter through them.

Zijes looked up at the low ceiling, eyes narrowing. 'Listening devices,' he

muttered.

‘Maybe. What does that matter?’ said Crowl, limping over to a chair and sitting in it heavily. ‘From the xenos, too, in all likelihood. Say what you think – no point in holding back now.’

Zijes stared at him for a moment, clearly fighting against distaste, before turning to Navradaran. ‘I want to hear it from you. Can’t you just confirm or refute all this? I mean, forgive me if I’m wrong, but you people *live* in there, right? Is he telling the truth?’

‘It is not as simple a matter as you suppose, inquisitor,’ Navradaran told him. ‘You saw the hololith projections – the Throne is a city in itself, its complexity beyond imagination. Those of us privileged enough to spend time within its precincts are perfectly aware of its imperfections, and do what we can to maintain and ward it, but it is the priesthood of Mars who are charged with understanding its inner workings. The greatest of their faith may even approach the Throne itself, to ensure that the most intimate connections between sacred flesh and holy machine are never permitted to degrade. Few of my order have that honour.’

‘But you must have an idea. Can we believe him?’

‘The innermost chambers of that place are drenched in the warp. Perception itself is changed, depending on the thoughts and character of the observer – what we saw in that display was what the priests of Mars see, when they enter. I did not recognise it all, even though I have trodden some of the same paths. For all that, I have no trouble believing that some mechanisms are close to failure. We see enough, and report enough, for that to be plausible. Only detailed study of Raskian’s evidence could settle the matter.’

Crowl shook his head. ‘Nonsense,’ he growled. ‘Even if it were true, the cure is worse than the disease.’ He rubbed his face hard, kneading his flesh, and it felt as if the touch left bruises. ‘He’s scared. Raskian, I mean. He’s trying to cover his tracks with this deal, but it can’t end well. Whatever they’ve promised him will be compromised somehow. You *know* this. We end it. We burn it all.’

‘No one doubts that the xenos are deceitful,’ Spinoza said. ‘But we all saw that component. The… *things* on it.’ Now she was looking more than uncomfortable. She was looking almost ill. ‘No tech-priest would be able to restore that.’

Crowl wasn't disappointed in her. In fact, he was impressed – the very knowledge that the Throne had non-Imperial components might have broken her, a year ago. One by one, though, her certainties were falling away.

'There must be another way,' he insisted. 'There must be.'

'One that you have yet to elucidate,' said Navradaran. 'And that is the crucial element. If we are convinced by the problem, then we must seek a solution. Appeals to hypotheticals are not enough.'

'So you would countenance xenos interference with the very structure of the Throne,' accused Crowl.

'If Raskian speaks truly,' said Navradaran, 'then there is no alternative.'

Zijes continued to look unhappy. 'They worked hard to cover their tracks, these conspirators,' he muttered, brow furrowing in thought. 'Do honest brokers work that hard?'

'Maybe not,' said Navradaran. 'Maybe the Lord Crowl is correct, and Raskian is merely seeking a way to avoid embarrassment. I care not. I only care whether he is right, and whether the proposed cure can be effective.'

'And if he's not?' asked Zijes. 'If the xenos are playing him?'

Navradaran looked him directly in the eye. 'Do not believe, for even a moment, that if I judged Raskian and all his allies to be a threat to the Emperor's person I would not orchestrate their immediate and complete destruction.'

Crowl chuckled. 'He would, at that,' he said, smiling dryly at Zijes. 'But he has to be sure. You all have to be *sure*. You'll study these things here, waste some more time. And that's what will damn us.'

A chime sounded at the door then. Navradaran indicated his assent, and a tech-priest entered the chamber. This one looked fairly close to human-normal in dimensions and manner, and gave an aquila using human-like hands. 'Forgive the intrusion, Lord Custodian,' it said. 'I am to convey that a request has been made for the attendance of the Lord Crowl at a private meeting.'

'By whom?'

'By the xenos.'

Spinoza immediately looked over at Crowl. Zijes smiled to himself, as if that confirmed a suspicion.

Crowl himself didn't immediately know what to think. At the very

mention of the xenos, he felt a cold spasm of fear, the same that had plagued him in the Hollow Mountain.

‘For what purpose?’ asked Navradaran.

‘Undisclosed,’ said the priest. ‘They give surety of safe passage. They were at pains to point out that it would not serve their cause to do otherwise, given the state of the discussions, and that they have honoured all guarantees made to the Fabricator General’s entourage during the course of the negotiations. It is, though, entirely at the inquisitor’s discretion.’

‘Accompanied?’ Navradaran asked.

‘Alone.’

The Custodian turned towards Crowl. ‘I do not see any value in this.’

‘Agreed,’ said Spinoza, with feeling. ‘No value at all.’

Gorgias, who had been silent up to that point, concurred immediately. ‘*Nulla purposa,*’ he muttered. ‘Obfuscation. *Molto peligroso.*’

Crowl found himself wanting to laugh. In this, at least, they were all united. And they were entirely correct – no useful purpose could be served by a meeting with the enemy, one whom he despised above all else. Unless, that was, the xenos hoped to change his mind too, in which case going to meet them could only weaken the position he had held, stubbornly and in the face of constant doubt, since this thing had started.

A terrible idea, all in all.

‘I will go,’ he said.

‘I advise against it,’ Navradaran said firmly.

‘Why? My position in this debate had been made clear. I have nothing more to add, so my presence here is pointless. You can get on with studying Raskian’s scrawls without me.’

‘It is too dangerous,’ Spinoza objected.

‘Really? If they wished to kill me, or any of us, right now, do you think they are incapable of it?’

‘Killing’s not the worst thing they do,’ Zijes observed.

‘Oh, you think they might *turn* me, do you?’ Crowl raised an eyebrow. ‘Very little faith you have, in the oaths of our office.’

‘But what good can come of it?’ Navradaran asked.

‘What good?’ Crowl stared at them all in turn, incredulous. ‘Just what are we trying to do, here? Seek the truth. And who knows more about all this, for good or ill, than the ones who claim to be our saviours? Thus far they

have only spoken to Raskian, who is as invested in this as they are.' His rheumy eye rested on Navradaran again. 'I am the sceptic, it seems. If you wish to know what they're really thinking, if you wish to hear the argument from the other side, then this is the one chance we'll get.'

Navradaran considered that. Gorgias bobbed around, greatly disturbed. Spinoza looked like she wanted to say more, but did not.

'You are an agent of the Throne,' Navradaran said at last. 'I do not recommend it, but I will not prevent you.'

'Very good,' said Crowl, getting to his feet. 'While I'm gone, though, keep working at it. You never know – by the time I return, we could all be agreeing with one another.'

Zijes watched him go, a weary look on his face. 'Remember your oaths,' was all he said, sourly.

Gorgias darted after him, then appeared to change his mind, hung back and switched his oculus to a miserable brown. 'Bad-bad,' he muttered. '*Stupido*. Bad-very-bad.'

Spinoza was the only one to reach out to him as he made to leave, placing her hand on his. 'My lord,' she said, her face etched with worry. 'We have not been able to… I mean, things remain unsaid.'

Crowl almost halted, in the face of that. She was genuinely concerned. Not for what it meant for the decision, not for herself, but – even after all that had happened – for *him*. He hesitated, seeing all the reasons again why this was foolish – arrogant, even – and felt the fear again, sharp as a blade at his stomach.

But some things were destined now, set in motion by actions taken half-way across a galaxy and deep in another time. From the moment he had looked into that creature's eyes on Terra, locked in the foundations of the very machine they were now trying to save, he had known that the moment would surely come.

'I will return, Spinoza,' he said, placing his withered hand over her healthy one. 'We will speak again.'

The tech-priest motioned towards the door. Then Crowl was moving, walking away again, out to face the architect of the scheme for a second time.

The tech-priest took him to the edge of the Mechanicus enclosure. They

walked down a long windowless corridor until they found themselves standing before a pair of heavy blast doors.

'I will not accompany you further,' it told him. 'Protocol demands that the delegations only come into contact with one another during scheduled negotiation periods.'

'Understood,' said Crowl. 'My thanks for showing me this far.'

The priest withdrew, gliding back the way it had come. Crowl found himself staring at the heavy plasteel doors. His heart rate was elevated. He felt very sweaty. He was not prone to panic, though he felt like he might be suffering from it then. Even the raids in the webway, as shocking as they had been at the time, had not provoked such trepidation in him.

He was self-aware enough to guess the cause. The xenos, in some form or other, had never really left him after that first encounter. The sicker he got, the more he had felt its presence all around him, inside him, watching him, goading him, peering out from every reflection.

And now it was close again, in the flesh. Just a few metres away, probably. What was it thinking now? Eager to see him again? Apprehensive, too? Did xenos ever feel such things? Or was it, despite what he had confidently told Spinoza, only summoning him in order to kill him, and end the whole charade?

That was unlikely – it would destroy the entire operation. Still, the fear didn't leave him. His fingers felt numb and tingly, his joints painful. He was far too old for this.

When the doors finally jerked apart and started to slide, the audible crack made him jump. He took in a deep breath, and that was a mistake, because enough air from the other side had already bled through the gap and the stench made him gag.

Two xenos were waiting for him. They were both female, he thought, and carried long, curved blades at their waists. They were thin, almost emaciated, very tall, their muscles edged in sharp relief under taut, translucent skin. They both reeked of rotting meat. One had dry bloodstains on her chin. They both looked at him with strange expressions – a mix of loathing and desire and hatred and curiosity. Indeed, it seemed that their expressions were never quite still, but flickered rapidly from one to another. Even their simplest movements – the lifting of an arm, the movement of an eyelid – were horribly fast, as if they inhabited a realm of perception where

time itself was somehow tracked differently.

‘He’s waiting, then?’ Crowl asked, trying, and failing, to sound unconcerned at the prospect of going deeper inside.

One of the warriors nodded, not deigning to speak. She extended a bony hand adorned with long, talonlike fingernails, half-turning to beckon him inside. Swallowing dryly, he stepped over the threshold.

The corridor on the xenos side of the partition was constructed of the same organic material as the webway conduits, though it had less of that eerie mist clinging to it. It looked wet, as if it ran with condensation. Every surface was dark, with only a faint electric-blue illumination welling up from hidden sources to break the gloom. The smell was hideous – a mix of alien secretions, blood and sweat. To go inside felt like stepping into the refuse pits of a hive-sump abattoir.

Jarrod had told him that this faction of the aeldari xenos viewed humans as little more than animals, seeing themselves as infinitely elevated in accomplishment and refinement. Looking at them, though, you wouldn’t have thought it.

Do they see how they look? Crowl thought as he walked along beside them, trying not to be too affected by the sheer otherness of their movements. *Do they realise how they appear?*

He guessed they didn’t. Like some inbred fellowship of insane aristocrats locked in a decaying mansion at the summit of an empty spire, the xenos appeared to be operating under a colossal weight of self-deception. He wished he knew more of what must have happened to them, to make them like this. It couldn’t have been natural, surely. It must have been some great trauma, some enormous rupture, to result in such uniform and evident madness.

Eventually they reached a doorway – a tear-shaped aperture in a wall of writhing obsidian tendrils. As they approached it, the lens-like covering withdrew. Crowl’s escorts did not go inside with him. One of them wiped the blood from her lips while staring at him absently. The other did not look in his direction at all.

He went through the portal, and felt the lens slip back across to seal him inside.

The chamber was not large. Every surface within it was highly polished and finely made. The same soft blue light bled out from many hidden

caches, catching on sharp edges and sweeping curves. Furniture of various kinds was placed across the room's gleaming floor, though the shapes were hard to interpret. One piece might have been a table, though its upper surface was so disfigured with spikes and hooks that it could never have held much. A cabinet stood up against the wall with no obvious doors to open. A tall pillar-shaped object stood on the opposite side, studded with tiny spiked spheres and geometric solids, including a striking hand-sized tetrahedron engraved with eldritch runes. Most of the items had collections of surgical-style instruments protruding from them, all highly polished. There was a full-length mirror with pitch-black glass, a crystal rack filled with goblets, a stack of books with ebony jackets.

One chair stood in front of him. The chamber's only occupant was not sitting on it – it appeared to be floating just off the floor, with a pair of unshod feet hanging like rotten fruit from the torn hem of a long black robe.

'Sit,' the creature said. 'You will pass out soon, if you do not.'

Crowl, almost as if in a dream, did as he was bid.

It was impossible not to stare at the monstrosity before him. It was ugly. It was quite the ugliest, foulest, most disgusting thing Crowl had ever seen. It reeked even worse than its warriors. Its skin – that meagre remnant that still remained – was virtually transparent, encasing a scrawny, gristly body of gnarls, polyps and tumours. Extensive emendations had been made to its form – extra limbs hung from its back and shoulders like the blackened fronds of a dying plant. Its cloths were mere rags, flapping wetly over sites of self-mutilation. Bones were visible, jutting out of glossy sutured ruptures; spikes and clamps punched and puckered black-edged flesh wounds.

Its face was the worst. Looking into its eyes was horrific, and yet he had gazed into them before. Just as they had been in the underhive on Terra, those eyes were empty, bottomless pits into nothingness. Only cruelty reflected from them, and not merely any kind of cruelty – not *human* cruelty, which was an aberration and a fault in the species – but constitutive cruelty. This thing was made of it; it was built by it and sustained by it. It breathed in pain, it exhaled desperation. Even the air of the chamber seemed to shimmer and hiss around it, repelled by proximity to such raw and pungent moral degeneration.

'You look worse than when we last met,' the xenos said.

It spoke perfect, if archaic, Gothic. The accent was High Terran, the tone of voice close to human.

'I am worse,' Crowl admitted. 'Much worse. You, though, are… different.'

The xenos shrugged. Just like its warriors, emotions seemed to cycle and flicker all the time under its ravaged facial features, a constant ripple of silent music that was never stilled. 'Dying is something I have done many times before, and shall no doubt do again.' It stared at him with its awful, awful black-in-black eyes. 'A facility we have. A mere drop of blood, did you know that? Just a single drop – enough to wind body and soul back around, remaking an entire life, should you know what you are doing.'

'You seem proud of your perversion.'

'Perversion? Really? Your own people seem keen to gain our assistance, after all.'

'I intend to stop them.'

'I do not think you can.'

'We shall see.'

Now it was the xenos' turn to study him carefully. 'It would be a mistake to try,' it said. 'I understand your loathing of us. In your position, I might feel much the same. But here is the thing – we need you.'

'You prey on us.'

'We do. Unavoidably. But that is immaterial here. If you are extinguished, then so are we. The physical galaxy becomes a howling wasteland, consumed by the warp, and we starve. That is what I intend to prevent. We must not starve. We must endure.'

Crowl felt his lip curl in involuntary disgust. '*Why?* Why must you? All living things revile you. Even your own cousins do. And deep down, I suspect, you revile yourselves.'

The xenos considered that. 'So many of your kind have told me that,' it said. 'During the soul-feeding, most often. I find it interesting. I suspect it results from a limited imaginative capacity on your part.' It blinked, and for a blessed moment those eyes were masked. 'And I could say the same of you. All things wish to preserve themselves. The krork. The devourers. Even the yngiraeth. They at least have some reason for doing so. Your kind's reasons died a long time ago – you only wish to remain alive for the sake of it, clinging on out of some primal stimulus-response.'

Crowl shook his head. 'How little you understand of us.'

‘Oh, really?’ The xenos’ ruined lips twitched a little. It raised a clawed hand, and extended a single digit. From all around them both, soft music began to play, wafting up from unseen emitters. For a moment, Crowl had no idea what it was, only that it wasn’t the filth he’d heard out in the webway. Despite himself, despite wishing to have nothing to do with this charade, he had to listen. And the more he listened, the more he wanted to – he found that he wasn’t breathing. He always forgot to breathe, faced with this.

‘Bacque,’ he murmured.

‘Bach,’ corrected the xenos.

‘That’s what I said.’

‘No, like this. Ba*ch*.’

Crowl looked up at it, bewildered. ‘How did you–’

‘Genius, is it not? Produced in your race’s infancy, back when my kind merely observed your habits out of intellectual curiosity. Never bettered. I would trade all of Commorragh’s pleasure-pits for more. Keep listening.’

He did. In some ways, it was the worst horror of all, having this music, the devotion to which had been his most private joy, played to him by such a creature. It tainted it, spoiled it. And yet, here it was still, perfect, beautiful, as immaculate as a pearl lost in the sordid unreality of this realm of pain.

After a few precious moments, the sound faded away. The xenos had closed its eyes. When it opened them again, a trail of tears ran down its sunken cheeks. ‘Astonishing,’ it said sincerely. ‘You do not feel it, as we do. But I must believe that even you can be moved too, to some degree.’

‘What is the point of this?’

‘To show you what you once were. Something. You *lived* then. You created. Now you merely exist.’ The xenos wiped its damp cheeks with a dirty handkerchief pulled from one of its many pockets. ‘I know a great deal about you, Erasmus Crowl. Our blood mingled, for a moment, and so I know things of you, just as you know things of me. Look around you. This place is not quite unfamiliar, I think.’

That was true. The longer he spent in the chamber, the more he intuited the functions of its various components, all of which were artful and uncanny. The table was a device used in what the xenos called soul-feeding – torture. He could begin to understand how its various elements worked – nothing he had ever used in his own interrogation chambers had been so precise. The

mirror’s surface gave nothing away. It was very large, framed in a typically elaborate mass of runes and xenos devices. He shivered, remembering the ones he’d smashed, even as he found himself wanting to reach out and touch this one now, because he sensed already what it could do.

‘I am nothing like you.’

‘In some respects, that is true. You will not live for much longer. I see the life force within you draining out, moment by moment.’

‘You accelerated that.’

‘Possibly. If you had the imagination, I might be able to persuade you to linger for a while here. I could show you how trivial it is, in truth, to make death just another banished phantom. But I know you will not.’

‘Forgive me if I doubt the reliability of everything you say.’

‘Everything? That is a little harsh. The best lies are those that cleave closest to the truth.’ The creature shifted, and its limbs jangled against its ruined hide. ‘And this is the truth. We can repair the Carrion Throne. We do so not out of sympathy, but because it serves our interests.’

‘What were you doing, back there on Terra?’

‘When we first met? Seeing for myself what needed to be done. Assessing the foundations.’

‘I believed you were mad.’

‘Again, often alleged. But no, I had to make certain observations. For my own satisfaction.’

Crowl found himself becoming disorientated. It was hard to remember how he had felt back then. ‘I do not believe you,’ he said. ‘There is deception here.’

‘There is always deception. Believe me, though, when I tell you this. If the arrangements made here do not succeed, then your race is doomed. Maybe within a few years, maybe even centuries, but the day of destruction will surely come. We ourselves may find some alternative solution to that eventuality, but you will not. I say it again, since you seem to have trouble understanding it – this is extinction. Final, irrecoverable.’ The creature cracked its knuckles unpleasantly. ‘Set against that, I have some trouble understanding why the prospect of this bargain going ahead, with all of its imperfections, continues to vex you.’

‘Because there has to be a better way.’

‘Name it, then.’

‘The Throne was created by the Emperor. He is our guide and our judge – He must show us the path.’

The creature sighed, briefly exposing its blackened needle-teeth. ‘Shall I cushion the blow for you? Or simply tell you here and now that the Emperor did not create the Throne, but adapted it from a thousand different stolen artefacts of older races? Or that its function is misunderstood by your people, and that if you ever discovered the truth, it would, at the very least, rip your deluded empire in half? That worst of all, the Emperor you place so much store by is entirely irrelevant to the machine’s ongoing function?’

Crowl pulled himself upright – he had begun to slouch from weariness. He badly need a shot of something, to keep him going, to keep his mind working. ‘He is our only protection. Our only light in the darkness.’

‘Come, now. I know you better than this. You have a rare intellect. You are a prince of your race, one of that infinitesimally small fraction of your kind who are allowed to think for themselves. You may loathe the alien, but some of us know more of your history than you do yourselves. Your body is failing you, but your mind remains your own. Use it.’

Crowl worked to keep his chin up. Just being there, looking at the thing, was exhausting. ‘But why do you even care? I have no power to stop this, not by myself.’

For the first time, the creature looked as if it were thinking about its answer to that, as if everything up until then had been rehearsed, but now something significant had been said that required consideration. It smiled to itself, its cadaver-thin face twisting as its modified muscles rearranged.

‘It is just as I told you,’ it said. ‘Our blood mingled. I have an interest in you, sentimental maybe, but one that goes beyond the temporary business of deals and contracts.’

Its eyes radiated darkness. Its body exuded cruelty.

‘Because you will die soon, Erasmus Crowl,’ it said. ‘And I would rather you did not do so while remaining committed, in error, to your own race’s destruction.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Spinoza looked up at Zijes. The two of them were just where they had been for the past few hours – poring over heaps of parchment and data-slates. They were alone, save for the hovering Gorgias, having moved into one of the librarium's sub-chambers. The Custodians remained busy in a number of adjoining rooms, diligently assessing the material Raskian had given them.

'What do you think?' she asked.

He looked exhausted. The arrogance that he had carried with him since their first meeting had almost entirely gone now, replaced by a kind of numb disbelief. All things considered, he was handling it fairly well. She had had much longer to acclimatise to the heretical concepts being bandied about. He even managed a wan smile.

'That I wanted to take you back to Terra,' he said.

'Ah, well. You did not know the situation.'

'You tried to tell me.'

She pushed her stack of parchment away. There was only so long a non-Martian mind could stand looking at the esoterica of the Machine-Cult. 'And I am trying to find a way to reject all this.'

‘Because of Crowl?’

‘Because of *them*.’

‘Quite.’ Zijes pressed his balled fists into his eyes, rubbed them hard. ‘Look, I’m no tech-priest, but these decay-projections seem… compelling. It’s a scandal they were kept secret at all, but there’s little point in making that the bone of contention here.’

‘Navradaran believes the same thing.’

‘He told you that?’

‘He did.’

Zijes let out a long breath. ‘Then we edge closer to letting this thing happen.’

‘Do we?’

‘See, tell me if I’m missing something,’ Zijes said carefully. ‘The final session of negotiations is due. Right now. If all goes well, Raskian will bring up his replacement components for testing. He’ll give the xenos the means to check biomechanical compatibility with the greater machine, here, in this place and under his supervision. Unless a fault is detected in the tests, the components will be prepared for transit, then delivered to the Mechanicus, who will then be free to take them to Mars for further investigation. If they’re sure all’s well, and only then, they can begin the task of integration. They’ll have been given instructions, they tell us. In exchange, the xenos will be given everything they need to bypass the defences of Kirill IX. There will be no second infiltration of the Palace, no further contact between the delegations.’ He frowned. ‘So what *explicit* danger – to the Imperium – is there, here? What reason for *not* letting it proceed?’

‘Diabolicus,’ Gorgias hissed. ‘*Hereticus majoris.* All lies.’

‘Agreed,’ said Spinoza. ‘It is too neat to be true.’

‘Navradaran’s a creature of law. We’ll need reasons better than *it feels wrong*.’

‘The replacement devices might be sabotaged.’

‘But they tell us the originals are already defective. What would it gain them, to provide us with broken replacements?’

‘Nineteen billion souls.’

‘Your man Crowl said it – they’re already able to raid worlds. It’s not much return for such an elaborate scheme. In any case, the Mechanicus

claim to be able to test everything before making the transfer. It's not enough.'

Spinoza laughed. 'You weren't so sure about fighting this, back on Luna.'

'Yes. Well. I've seen the principals now. Scary people.' Zijes leaned back, ran a hand through his hair. 'It's death for us in any event, as things stand. I mean, even if it happens, Raskian won't allow any of us to leave this place alive, will he? He couldn't, not if he still wished to keep it secret.'

'Maybe so, with us. But the Custodians? I would like to see him try.'

'They might be persuaded to say nothing, if they truly believed, as you think, that it's the correct thing. Inquisitors, though – too unreliable.'

Spinoza sighed. 'Possibly correct. But that cannot be the basis for our judgement. It must not be. Only one element counts. What do we believe?'

Zijes' expression became serious. 'Raskian's committed. He has to press on now. The Custodian's a creation of the Throne – he can't even *imagine* harm coming to it, so he might be persuaded to back it. What about you?'

She didn't want to answer. Crowl had not come back yet, and might have something further to contribute. Perhaps Zijes already knew what she thought, in any case – she was too tired to dissemble, and there seemed little point in keeping things hidden. So much misery and doubt had already come from that strategy, and the cycle had to break sometime.

'I spent so long fighting him on it,' she said. 'But he's been right too often, and now we see them, here, for what they are. No. It cannot be permitted.'

Zijes nodded. 'So how do we stop it? We've not many guns left.'

'Kill-kill, *molto vigoroso*,' said Gorgias, indicating his willing participation.

'Devra will follow Navradaran,' Zijes said.

'Then we get to him.'

'Not good enough. Nine Custodians could carry this through even without the Sentinels.'

'Then… what? We just stand back? Let our betters make the running?'

Spinoza stared at the tabletop, clenched her fists, willed herself to think clearly.

'We arm up,' she continued. 'We prepare. Navradaran might choose to end this, but if he does not, if he lets himself be blinded to the danger, we will have to act *then*. My forces, yours, all at once. Whatever devices they bring for exchange, we destroy them before they are able to finish us all off. It

might be enough. Until then, we give them no sign. We follow orders.'

Zijes looked at her, a play of faint amusement on his weary features. 'I said you were a type, Spinoza,' he said. 'I undersold you. I am sorry.'

'Do not be.' She looked around her, at the poorly made walls, the flimsy barriers that kept the nightmare of the webway out. 'I feel wretched. Utterly wretched. I was too slow to believe him. I thought that a High Lord was infallible.' She laughed bitterly at the memory. 'I thought that they were His will made manifest. Immune to error. United in commitment.'

'Really?'

'I no longer believe that.'

'Then something good's come of all this.'

'But no action now,' Spinoza said firmly. 'None. Crowl has not returned. I must speak to him. Whatever you think of him, he deserves that.'

'Fine. I'll talk to Channa. But I won't wait for him forever – time is running out.'

That was true. It had always been true.

'Have faith,' she said, trying to make herself certain of it. 'He will return.'

After they returned to the dorm-chamber housing the troops, there wasn't much to do but wait. Khazad and Revus replaced the ceiling panel. They compared notes, enabling them to construct a reasonably accurate picture of how the corridors and rooms within the enclosure related to one another. They rehearsed it, committed the turns to memory. Then they spoke to Channa.

'Any change while we were gone?' Revus asked.

'Nothing,' said Channa, her voice low. 'Total silence.'

'Spinoza?' asked Revus.

'Not back yet. Nor Lord Zijes. Not even a vox.'

So that was it. They waited. Khazad cleaned the power feeds of Okira, her blade. Revus dismantled his hellgun, cleaned it out and reassembled it. They both ate.

When Khazad finally heard the skitarii stir at their guard-stations just outside the doors, she assumed that it was Spinoza coming back, or maybe Navradaran. In the event, it was Crowl, alone, and looking worse than ever. The inquisitor limped through the doorway, breathing heavily, then reached out to one of the cot-frames to steady himself. Revus hurried over, Khazad

just behind him.

‘Do you need anything, lord?’ Revus asked. ‘More medicae?’

Crowl shook his head. His skin tone was now more yellow than grey, his eyes red-rimmed pits. His hand-tremors were more violent than they had been, and it took a while before his breathing allowed him to speak.

‘How are they treating you?’ he asked eventually.

‘We have what we need,’ said Revus.

‘Except freedom to move,’ said Khazad.

Crowl nodded. ‘Regrettable. I would speak to the Fabricator General, but I fear he is disinclined to listen.’ He chuckled to himself, which provoked a fit of coughing. Khazad reached for a water canister, and handed him some. He drank a little, though not as much as it looked like he needed to.

‘How can we serve?’ asked Revus, his voice low. The three surviving members of Courvain’s storm trooper squad were standing by, but the rest of the Imperials remained at a distance, including Channa’s troops.

‘For now, I don’t know,’ said Crowl. ‘A summit is coming. All these things shall be decided.’ He looked sour about that. ‘Then I might have need of you. What have you discovered?’

‘There are paths out of here,’ said Khazad. ‘The place is not well made.’

‘No, they never expected to have company,’ said Crowl. ‘Any way into the xenos area?’

‘One that we found,’ said Revus.

‘So you could take me there?’

The captain looked doubtful. ‘In theory,’ he said.

Crowl laughed. ‘If I were up to it, you mean? I’m not dead yet.’ Then he was serious again. ‘But would you do it, eh? If I gave the order?’

‘Of course.’

‘You wish to strike at them now?’ asked Khazad.

Crowl reached out, fingers still shaking, and placed a grateful hand on Khazad’s forearm. ‘Just as I said back at home – you are a refreshing presence. But not that. I may have to go there. Something is nagging at me, something that refuses to go away. Good to know that you may be able to help me with it.’

‘Anything you can tell us?’ asked Revus.

‘Only that everything is doubtful. Nothing is clear. Even I no longer have any certainty.’ His eyes lost focus. ‘They are foul, to be sure, but is that

enough? A foul tongue may still speak the truth. Even the pain-bringer. I need time, but have none. I need counsel, but do not trust what I would be told.' He gave a rueful look. 'Not what you wanted to hear, captain. But it is the truth. We have come all this way, and still nothing is clear.'

'You… *spoke* to them,' Khazad said, suddenly realising where he'd been.

'One of them. An old friend.'

'And it didn't…'

'Kill me? No, they don't want to upset this. They want it to happen. Afterwards, though? Maybe. You have to hope that Raskian has plans.'

More noise came from the corridor outside – the scrape of skitarii claws along the floor panels.

'I must return to them,' Crowl said. Then he looked at them both, each in turn. 'We'll have to pick the moment. And it'll have to be when eyes are elsewhere. But you'll do this for me? Indulge an old man, one last time?'

Revus never looked comfortable, but he'd made his oaths. 'As you command,' he said.

For Khazad, it was easier – in truth, she was already getting bored of waiting around. 'It will be pleasure,' she said fiercely. 'Just so long as I get to kill some of them before the end.'

Spinoza heard him long before she caught sight of him. She heard the wheezing breath, the tap and shuffle of his boots. She looked up from her work, listening. She heard words exchanged between him and Navradaran in the chamber beyond, too quiet for her to pick up what was said.

Then he hobbled into her own chamber, alive, and a wave of relief washed over her.

'Spinoza,' he rasped, leaning on the table's edge.

'Inquisitor.'

Gorgias excitably bobbed upward, his oculus throbbing a satisfied lime green.

'I'll leave you alone,' Zijes said, getting up and pulling his jacket on. He gave Spinoza a significant look. 'I need to brief Channa – we'll keep in touch.'

Once he'd gone, Crowl gave Spinoza a wry smile. 'You two seem to be getting on better.'

'Duty compels us,' she said impatiently, anxious to know what had

transpired. ‘How are you? What did it say?’

‘The same as Raskian,’ Crowl said flatly. ‘This is their scheme – what else would it say?’

‘So what did you make of it?’

Crowl sat down heavily, arms limp on the table. ‘On parchment, it still makes sense.’ He spread his hands, palms outward, a gesture of despair. ‘It makes *sense*. We work so hard, try to undermine it at every turn, and now I struggle to think of why, save for the cold certainty in my heart.’ He shook his head. ‘Huk is dead. Adamara, dead. Courvain as empty as a grave, and the Beacon dark. All that work. All that work.’

He looked defeated. His shoulders were hunched, his gaze unfocused.

‘Do not say such things,’ Spinoza said gently. ‘It is not over yet. They kept it secret.’

‘Ah, that’s the way of the Imperium, though, isn’t it? Never tell the truth when a conspiracy will do.’ He sighed. ‘And Raskian was right, of course. He’d never have got this through the Council.’ Another long pause. ‘Its malice is in me. That’s why we were allowed here. That’s why it wanted to speak to me. Open my veins, and you’ll see only its poison now, keeping me going. We’re the same, me and that thing. I don’t even know why it wanted to talk, to convince me to support all this. Pride, maybe. Completeness. Or just madness, like so much else.’

‘Or that it recognised you are still at the centre. That Navradaran still listens to you. That I do.’

‘Navradaran will do what he will.’

‘Only after taking in all the evidence. He is exhaustive. And exhausting.’

Crowl looked up sharply. ‘Was that a pun, Spinoza?’

She smiled. ‘Forgive me. I am very tired.’

‘But still capable of acting?’

‘Very much so.’ She leaned in closer. ‘Zijes is with us. It cannot be allowed to proceed. If the Custodians do not move, we must halt it ourselves.’

Crowl looked up at her sharply, startled and pleased. His face creased up with genuine emotion, and then, almost immediately, with concern. ‘You couldn’t do it. Not against nine of them. And the enemy. They’d kill you all.’

‘But if we wait, pick our moment, we might yet sabotage the exchange.’

‘No. You cannot be ended here, not for this. Too many have died already.’

‘Given the stakes, I do not think our survival counts for much.’

‘But that’s the problem, isn’t it? The whole damn problem with this whole damn thing. It counts for *everything*, or what are we even trying to preserve?’ He had become vehement, and it made him cough wretchedly. ‘I want you to live. I want you to keep them together. Gorgias, Revus, the assassin. Don’t think I don’t see the way they are with you. Revus especially. You are the inquisitor now.’

‘I think we are past that.’

‘And the irony is that I never wanted an equal.’ His gaze wandered. ‘Just a companion to mould into an image of myself. But I got one – one I could have learned from, if there were only more time. Oh, all the *mistakes*…’

‘Lord, I–’

Then clarity suddenly returned. Crowl’s expression hardened. For a moment, he looked almost as he had done in the past. ‘Say nothing, Spinoza. Just for a moment. Listen with utmost care. I will not go to this summit. I have nothing to add to it. But you must. The creature will be there. Its allies will be there, many of its warriors, for they are arrogant enough to think that nothing could possibly hurt them in this place. Certainly I am no threat, because I told it that I would no longer stand in the way of the scheme, and when I said it, a part of me even believed it.’

‘But you are not quite done.’

‘Not quite. I have a thorn in my side. It tears at me, and I cannot get it out.’

‘Then let me come with you.’

‘No. You’re needed. You and Zijes. You have a crozius arcanum, for the love of Terra – even the Custodians respect that. If you need to, if you need to act, then no one else could do it as well. But *wait*. Wait as long as you possibly can. There might be a way, even now – Navradaran is the key.’

This was the Crowl she remembered now, at least an echo of it. She surpassed him in so many ways now, and had every reason to doubt his current judgement and ability to function, but his commitment had never been in question. And now, as the end neared, something of the old resolve had seemingly returned.

‘I am your interrogator, my lord,’ she said firmly, taking his hand in hers and clasping it tight. ‘All shall be as you direct.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The moment came without warning. All the chronos taken into the webway were still spinning wildly, but perhaps the tech-priests had their own means of keeping track of things. The final session of negotiations was announced, the moment when the decision would be made.

Some items still needed to be clarified. The precise arrangements for Kirill IX's surrender were yet to be agreed – the xenos wished for assurances that they would not arrive there to be confronted by surprise defenders. As Raskian had said, some elements of the xenos' promised technology had yet to be tested against genuine components from the Throne-chamber itself, and so some doubt remained that the psychic material would interface correctly.

All of it would be resolved in this session, according to Raskian's envoys. It would take place in the open for all to see, with no possibility of deception. A special chamber had been reserved for the gathering, one fizzing with counter-espionage devices and anti-psychic wards. Representatives from both delegations had crawled over it for days, eagerly searching for any hidden traps, before both pronounced it clean.

Spinoza spoke to Navradaran and Zijes one last time before they made

their way to the assigned location.

‘I will allow the session to go ahead,’ Navradaran told them. ‘My companions will be prepared. You are to bring your troops, and have them primed for the first sign of aggression.’

‘And the key question?’ Spinoza asked him. ‘Will you permit him to make the exchange?’

‘The threat has been proven,’ the Custodian replied gravely. ‘No other solution has been proposed. So the final arguments must now be made.’

So cautious. *Still* observing, still calculating. Was this their weakness? Spinoza wondered. Was this why they had hidden away for so long, sheltering in obscurity? That they had lost their decisiveness over the wearing course of millennia?

‘The Lord Crowl,’ Navradaran observed. ‘He is not with you.’

‘He is near death,’ said Spinoza. ‘At the very end now, I judge. He does not feel able to attend, and I do not see the purpose in dragging him to an event about which he has already made his views plain.’

Navradaran nodded. ‘So be it. We alone shall be the judges.’ He hefted his guardian spear meaningfully. ‘Battle-sign arrangements are coordinated. I say it again – the first sign of something going awry, I will give the signal.’

Spinoza nodded, resisting the urge to look at Zijes. If no signal came from the Custodian, then they would have to act alone. Her only doubt then was whether that would be sufficient – whether they could move quickly enough before the combined forces massed around them snuffed out the threat. She felt a tightness in her chest – the gathering of tension that would only grow – and hoped she hid it adequately.

‘By your will,’ she said.

The summons came. The surviving Inquisitorial troops, minus Revus and Khazad, plus Devra’s Palatine Sentinels, formed up and marched into the assembly room. They were met by the Custodians and a small escort of skitarii. Gorgias floated nervously overhead, staying close to Spinoza at all times.

‘*Peligroso,*’ he muttered. ‘*Insanus. Molto* watch-out.’

‘Yes, keep a close watch,’ Spinoza murmured. ‘We may need your reactions in there.’

They filed through the corridors, passing the chamber where they had first met Raskian, though not entering it. More skitarii joined them, filtering

from hidden chambers, some of them dressed in fine ritual robes, others bearing heavy weapons fused to their metalwork limbs. By the time they reached the large doors leading to the summit-chamber, more than a hundred of them marched and clanked along with the Imperials. The portal opened, and they all passed inside.

It was, suitably enough, the largest space they had seen thus far. The construction was, like all the rooms within the Mechanicus enclosure, Imperial-made, with heavy basalt columns supporting a high arched roof. The space extended for a hundred metres or so, already echoing with the massed boot-falls of arriving troops. More skitarii were assembled across the unadorned floor, some of them very heavily adapted for combat. Cadres of tech-priests shuffled around between the armed phalanxes, attended by censer-drones and electro-staves, adding a low, murmuring chorus of binharic cant. Large banners hung from the distant roof space, some marked with various insignias of the Mechanicus that Spinoza did not recognise, as well as some displaying the twin-headed aquila of the Imperium. Holding areas had been delineated for the Inquisitorial, Militarum and Adeptus Custodes participants near the centre of the gathered Martian clades, and they took their positions in silence.

Raskian's ludicrous bulk dominated all else. His full physical presence had already been hauled into place at the near end of the chamber on heavy repulsor-pads, and now sat like a building-within-a-building, hissing and flickering and ticking over, attended to by buzzing crowds of nano-drones and insectoid cyber-cherubs. The dwarf avatar had been placed on a throne atop a high dais, its mass of cabling trembling like a vast spider's web behind it. The entire place smelled heavily of sacral oils and incense, and the dull rumble of active machinery made the floor underfoot tremble.

Two giant sealed caskets sat in the shadows towards the rear of the Mechanicus ranks, both more than fifty metres long, thrumming gently on grav-plates. Their heavy lead panels were covered with a riot of arcane runes and occult symbols, and were guarded more heavily than anything else.

Spinoza took her place next to Zijes. 'The technical samples,' she whispered, pointing at the caskets. 'Destroy those, this ends.'

'Indeed,' said Zijes grimly, clearly gauging how quickly they could get to them, if needed. 'Not easy, though.'

Every member of the Imperial delegation had been arranged to face the far end of the chamber, which was currently empty. It felt like a formidable gathering – several hundred regular skitarii, dozens of heavy weapons variants, a brace of bipedal walkers carrying beam-devices, and Raskian himself, who – one imagined – had his own capabilities hidden in that vast shell of a body, all in ordered ranks like an army forming up for an assault.

Once all of them were assembled, the chamber quieted to a hush, broken only by the continuing sibilant whisper of binharic and the ongoing clunk of active gears and cog systems.

A theatrical pause followed, an expectant lull, all eyes fixed on a second pair of doors at the far end of the chamber.

When those finally opened, the creatures that emerged were every bit as extravagant and esoteric as the Martians who faced them. They had not come in anything like the numbers mustered by Raskian – a few dozen warriors of various kinds, most dressed in scraps of skintight clothing that seemed to offer no protection at all from even the weakest form of las-fire. They strutted with undiluted arrogance, barely glancing over at their Imperial opposite numbers. A few figures marched in closed armour, ornately made and crested with high, cruel helms. Some shambling monsters on leashes came with them, vaguely humanoid in shape but with obscenely bulging muscles and tiny hooded heads. Everything about them was an exercise in contradictions – their armour, poise and wargear looked far superior to even the Custodians', and yet there was something vaguely shabby about it all, as if they couldn't be bothered to look after it, or had forgotten how.

In the centre of the ramshackle group came two obviously senior figures. One floated above the ground, its grotesque body a mass of distortions and self-modifications. Its pale face lolled against a rib-thin chest studded with pins and sutures, while a gangling collection of additional limbs sprouted from clots of exposed gristle across its arched spinal column. Next to that one walked a tall warrior dressed in a sheer suit of nightshade armour. Its exposed face was pearl white, though heavily rouged and tattooed, with a crown of ink-black hair pulled tightly back against its scalp. A tinkling collection of trophies hung on chains from its faintly reflective battleplate – pieces of bone, tiny crystal vials enclosing plucked eyes and severed ears. It looked out at the world as if through eyes that could barely summon the

energy to care about anything they saw – as if all was grey and indistinct to a being of its unequalled heritage, reduced to peering through a fog of half-remembered grandeur and the savage lies of another age.

The xenos brought a giant hovering casket of their own with them – a tube of dark obsidian that ran with streamers of condensation. It was almost as large as the two hulking containers guarded by the Mechanicus, and came to rest alongside the leashed monsters.

'What is that?' Spinoza murmured, her voice low. 'Their replacement tech?'

Zijes nodded. 'Presumably. Or maybe something nastier.'

The xenos were hard to look at for any length of time. The very sight of such things kindled instinctual rage within her. She could smell their stench even over the various Mechanicus stinks, and it turned her stomach. The way they moved, the way they looked around them, the eerie, too-fast transitions that flickered across their emaciated features, it all contributed to her disgust.

I wish to see you all ended, she found herself thinking, remembering the screams in the webway, the monsters unleashed in the catacombs on Terra. *I wish only extermination upon you.*

She said nothing, of course. None of them did. When the first words echoed around the summit chamber, they came from the black-lipped mouth of the xenos leader.

'Illiandraeth el'shae-morvennael,' it started, in an age-cracked voice so perfectly dripping with contempt that it felt like being stabbed with needles. *'Iath na-felliandrel amainn savatya-naur…'*

Auto-translexers crackled into action, blurting machine-reel Gothic from their emitters.

'I, Archon Shae-Morvain, of the Kabal of the Still-Living Knife, open this final session of negotiations with the Lord of the Red Planet, speaking on behalf of the High Lords of Terra. May we find concord here, and enact the exchange this day, to the benefit of all.'

Unconsciously, Spinoza's hand crept down to Argent's hilt. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Zijes adjusting position to enable a rapid draw of his laspistol. Both of them started to calculate distances, timings, positions.

The tightness in her chest grew. The grav-casket was a long way off, and

plenty of enemies lay between it and them. Krak charges, maybe? Or would heavier weapons be needed? How would they even get close?

‘So it begins,’ Zijes whispered, his voice giving away a similar tautness.

Some way off, Navradaran was observing things impassively, making no movement, saying nothing.

‘So it does,’ Spinoza replied.

Revus shuffled through the same crawl-space as before, tracing the path that he had earlier scoped out. Behind him was Crowl, panting hard like a sick animal, and behind him, Khazad.

All of them were armoured, although in the inquisitor’s case it hardly seemed to help him, and made it harder for him to squeeze through the narrow gaps. Revus carried a belt of silenced krak microcharges alongside his favoured hellgun. Crowl carried Sanguine. Khazad trusted to her own blade, powered down as they squirmed and wriggled through the crawl-space.

Nothing about this felt good. Looking into Crowl’s eyes told Revus everything he needed to know about the man’s mental state. He owed the inquisitor more than simple loyalty, but being a storm trooper brought with it a distinct lack of sentimentality. His oaths of office compelled him to serve, and he would never have vocalised any of his doubts, but still. His duty, he could not help but think, lay elsewhere now, with Spinoza, not still running down the lingering dregs of this burnt-out quest while the true test lay elsewhere.

They squirmed down the incline and reached the blockwork wall, and Revus quickly located the narrow section Khazad had weakened. He ran the same auspex checks, revealing an empty corridor on the far side. He swivelled the scan-field – deserted.

He reached for the first microcharge. ‘Withdraw please, lord,’ he warned.

The charges clamped in place, all of them pulled back as far as they could. There was a soft *crump*, a bloom of dust and smoke. He crept forward, unstrapping his gun as he got close.

The charges had blown a small, jagged hole in the wall, just enough for each of them to ease through. Floor level on the far side was about two metres down – easy to jump. Revus wormed his way to the edge.

‘Going in,’ he voxed to Khazad, and pushed himself through.

He landed softly, crouching onto the deck and swivelling his hellgun around. The corridor was empty. It was almost completely dark, save for a blush of cold blue light that flickered and played across the glossy black surfaces. The floor was sticky with fluids. It was very cold. The same acrid smell of blood and sweat hung in the air, just as it had done when they had cornered that xenos warrior in the webway.

Revus beckoned up to the blast-hole, then moved carefully down the corridor. His heart rate was a fraction too high, his breathing too rapid.

Crowl clattered awkwardly to the deck behind him, followed by Khazad's silk-smooth descent. The assassin helped him up, drew her blade and fell into her familiar combat-stance. Crowl, breathing very thickly, limped after Revus.

'This way,' he croaked softly.

The three of them went warily, following Crowl's directions. At any moment, Revus expected his helm-lumens to flicker out, the shriek of an intruder to flash across his sensors, the sharp heat of a blade plunged into his ribs. He was getting too strung-out, too focused on the threat – he needed to ratchet the tension down a notch.

'Ahead, there,' whispered Crowl.

The corridor curved round, tracing a smooth arc as it headed towards the centre of the xenos enclosure. They weren't in the webway proper here, but a pocket carved from its innards, a counterpart to the same bubble the Mechanicus delegation had been housed in. Revus could sense the place's malevolence clearly now, throbbing behind his eyes, as if some enormous and semi-sentient pressure were building just on the far side of those eerily elliptical walls. The place was unearthly in its darkness and silence, somehow frozen, or sent into suspended animation.

They reached a wall with a tear-shaped door set into it. Its aperture was sealed with what looked like a frosted-glass lens. Crowl went straight up to it, held out his hand, pressed his flat palm against the material. It flexed a little, trembled, then withdrew. Revus shot a look at Khazad, who merely shrugged. Where had Crowl learned to do that? *How* could he do it?

By then, though, Crowl was already limping inside. Revus and Khazad came in with him, taut against danger. The chamber's interior was just as pitch-dark as the corridor, just as dank and malodorous. As Khazad slipped over the threshold, the lens covering slipped back across the doorway,

shutting them in.

Revus took a good look at the surroundings, aiming his hellgun methodically into every hidden corner. The smell of blood was stronger in here. As his lumen-beam swept across the far end of the chamber, he saw why – the remains of a body, or bodies, were still present on top of a long, low table. Scraps of skin hung from hooks, agonisingly stretched out, while pools of oily blood still slopped across muscle-heaps and onto the floor below. Instruments, all of them curved and barbed, had been left sticking out of the residue, as if kept ready for the work to resume at some stage, but thankfully whatever had been the subject of the creature's attentions was very dead now.

Crowl hadn't even noticed. From the very moment they'd entered the chamber, he'd only had eyes for a tall mirror set against the opposite wall, one that seemed far darker across its flat surface than it had any right to be. The lumen-beams were swallowed up whenever they flickered across it.

'They have tricks,' he rasped, staring at it eagerly. 'They come and go. Always in the mirrors.'

Khazad moved a little closer to him. 'What are you thinking?' she asked.

Crowl's eyes never left the mirror's surface, even though nothing reflected from it. 'I need you to guard this place, just while I am gone.' He looked up at her for a moment, then at Revus. 'You have questions. You worry that I should not know these things. I have nothing reassuring to tell you. I do not know how I know this either. Only what it told me itself – our blood mingled.' He laughed strangely, a half-strangled snort. 'So I am what I hate, Revus. At the very end, I am what I hate.'

Revus almost intervened then. A lifetime of conditioning to overcome, but still he almost moved to pull Crowl back, to prevent whatever it was the inquisitor had in mind, because it couldn't be anything wholesome.

Even if he'd moved, though, it would have been too late. Crowl leapt suddenly, a clumsy lunge, but still surprisingly fast given how he'd been just moments before. Revus saw the man's night-black armour hit the mirror's edge, saw the surface flex, saw the ripples of light and the actinic snap of force that curled and snapped at his master's heels.

And then he was gone. No shadow, no residue, just the black glass and the blood-soaked chamber.

'What now?' asked Khazad, sounding uncharacteristically horrified.

‘You heard him,’ Revus said, turning to train his hellgun at the door. ‘We stand guard.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It hurt.

He had always guessed that it would do. The pain-bringers thrived on sensation, barely understanding the difference between agony and pleasure, so steeped in existential boredom that even the things that gave them power were laced with torment.

Or perhaps he was not doing it right. There was always that chance. He felt like he was flying blind now, working purely on instinct after a lifetime of patient deduction. Some of what he'd seen in the creature's chamber made a kind of intuitive sense to him, but so much else was still a vile mess. It had been a literal leap into the dark, albeit one made with a strange kind of certainty at its base.

He was still in that chamber, he knew. His soul, his mind, the information required to construct his body – it was all there, folded up into the deep structure of the mirror. For as long as he remained within it, and the mirror remained intact, he was safe from harm. That was how their gaze moved around, the masters of that race, their physical selves bound up within these devices and their perception hurled across time and space.

All he had to do now was look. Observe. Use thought and intention to

direct his virtual eyes through a realm created by thought and intention. Jarrod had given him some clues about such things, but it had been the xenos' own poisons that had afforded him the full insight. They were the masters of matter, twisters and breakers of fundamental forces, artisans of technology so profound that it rivalled the uncanny power of the empyrean itself.

And so his mind's eye soared down the twisting ways of the web-network, hurtling as fast as thought, racing along conduits never before witnessed by humankind. He saw the full extent of the lattice open up before him, its snarls and its dead-ends, its vortices and its bottomless shafts. The expanse was breathtaking in both ambition and beauty, but it was also ruinous. It splayed out like a nervous system, pulsing and shivering, its extremities decayed but its core still navigable. He began to see patterns in the way the conduits were laid, and for a moment all he could think of were the same layouts within Raskian's Throne schematics. The same intelligences had been behind both things, perhaps, or maybe the latter had taken inspiration from the former. Who knew? Who could fathom even a tithe of such mysteries?

You could get lost forever in that maze, spend eternity soaring through its infinite reaches trying to understand it, and he felt the danger of that fate tug at him, especially given how weak he had become. After too long mired down in a single world, crushed and suffocated by the billions pressed around him, he was free to move again now, travelling at the speed of an idea, a gesture, a dream.

But he had not come here to escape. He had come to retrace the steps taken by the creature itself, to burrow down into the hidden place it had emerged from, the abyss where it had practised its long and storied depravities. It would be hard, even in his non-corporeal state, to visit that place. Even before all this had started, he'd known stories of the Dark City, the fabled haunt of infinite tortures closeted away in the depths of the empyrean's undercroft. Rumours of its legendary cruelty, its fabulous riches and its unfathomable treasures were whispered across the breadth of the human Imperium, spoken of either as myth or as a warning. To be a living soul in that place was to be in torment. No purer expression of evil had ever been constructed, for there was no pity in that realm, no redemption, only the endless rehearsal of excruciation for its own sake. A civilisation that had

once bestrode the stars themselves had been driven down into its lightless pits, reduced to scratching around in the sordid depths of sensation, sucking at the teat of anguish merely to stave off the extinction their own hubris had delivered.

He could never have got there in person, even in the very prime of his life and conditioning. A few seconds' exposure would have been enough to shred his sanity. Even at this remove, this strange condition of there-but-not-there, it would be a trial greater than any he had experienced in realspace. He was an unembodied eye, a single point of perspective, a mind without extension, and still the coming horror of it daunted him to the core of his being.

The thorn remained. The belief that something was wrong, that something was broken, and no one else could see it. So he had to go there, to the origin, to swirl and race down those infinitely branching tunnels, to ignore the intelligences gnawing at his sanity and tempting him outside the scant protection of those ancient and porous walls. He knew the path, at least in outline, for the creature's spoor was still everywhere, staining the way ahead like blood on parchment. Every decision he made, every exercise of will, spiked at him, carved a little more sanity away – he was no longer an inquisitor, no longer a true servant of the Emperor, for how could one such tolerate such forbidden knowledge, the transports of the enemy, the tech-sorceries of the alien? He was himself now, rendered down to his essence, the seeker after truth, the shattered soul striving for one last revelation before death.

And then he saw it, blooming up out of the deep dark – a clot, like ink in water, fouling the abyss with its multilayered grandeur. He saw a thousand other webway conduits running into its berths and landing stages, spiralling across the empyrean's pits to thread and twist into the bosom of the nexus. He saw pulses of light flickering like the lamps of doomed seafarers, entire ships and fleets surging down those channels, whole armies either returning from plunder or setting out to reave. Enormous arched gates flew by, larger and larger as the nexus grew close, each one inscribed with runes of warding against the daemonic or taunting messages in a thousand languages for those doomed to enter as booty.

It was *vast*. Far larger than he had dared to dream. If the High Lords knew just how colossal it was, how many docks and spires and gaols and

lightning-scarred vaults it possessed, would they have ever dreamed of doing business with its people? Would they not have sealed off that terrible network forever, if they could have – buried it, clamped down so hard on its every extrusion so that such monsters could never again burst forth from its scattered extremities to bring agony to the worlds of the sane?

He felt the pressure on his own sanity now, enormous, infinite. He heard the screaming even before his mind's eye spun through the first true gate, the chorus of endless anguish that rang like cathedral bells from every blood-steeped rooftop. The entire place vibrated with it, resonated with an endless repeat-loop of frenzied but unrequited pleading. No other sound made any impression – it was the air those things breathed, the gravity they walked in. It surged up from the torture-pits in the deepest depths, thrummed through the depraved fleshworks and oubliettes, shimmered over the gladiatorial circuses and rancid pleasure-domes – screaming, screaming, on and on, never ceasing, millions of voices never still, merged into an orgy of psychic terror that seemed to form its own physical structures, its own rivals to the pitiless towers that jutted up against the starless darkness in criss-crossed webs of pitch-black despair.

There was no true direction – spires jutted out from the sharply sweeping curves of the webway's edge, curving around to form a closed roof of downward-pointing pinnacles. It was a mouth, a gullet, a giant-toothed maw opening up to swallow the unwary.

But this was a mere staging post for the even-fouler glories within. His mind surged past towering constructs that glimmered with pale light in the screaming dark, immense voids powered by crackling black spheres, stacked hell-slums teeming with multitudes that made Terra's worst sumps look like a kind of paradise.

Down, down, down, soaring through gate after gate. He saw enormous ships docking at cavernous quays, unloading barges of terrified captives into the cruel hands of loaders. He saw tiny figures marching across slender bridges between constructs, racing as if to war. He saw speeders spin and dance through the maze of sculpture-like palaces and fortresses, whooping in a frenzy of feral abandon. Or were they scared, too? Something about the whole place seemed in the grip of terror – not just the unfortunates destined for the pain-chambers, but those who guarded them too.

He delved further down, spiralling through apertures ringed with hooks

and flesh-tearing crystal shards. Everything was sharp, designed to cut and tear – it was a city of knives, an entire world built from scalpels. The screaming began to change note, from horror to fury. He saw fighting in the high places – xenos against other xenos, a whirl of blades and the scatter of blood against the onyx walls. Except that they were not just xenos – some of the combatants were from the unreal dimension. They were unliving, true strangers to the galaxy of physical law.

The Neverborn. The god-shards. The *shaitainn*. Daemons.

He wondered how they could possibly be here. Had the xenos let them in? Didn't they have wards piled atop of wards, aeons of experience at keeping the empyrean at bay? Didn't their entire existence depend on that?

Suddenly he remembered what the creature had told him.

We can repair the Carrion Throne. We do so not out of sympathy, but because it serves our interests.

This was linked. This was all connected. Terra was in crisis, but so was this place. Something fundamental had shattered, maybe even across the entire galaxy. Even here, lost in the no-realm between realities. Even in the Dark City.

He plunged down further, racing past desperate battles raging amid the spiked spires. He saw whole phalanxes of xenos warriors hurling themselves into the heart of daemon hordes. He saw great towers collapsing, exploding into clouds of black diamond slivers as ravagers of both kinds pushed on through them. He saw mightier manifestations of the warp-bred kind roaring down in the far pits, monsters of such unbound power that even the princes of this place must have felt the tremors of impending destruction. It was all coming apart. He heard the voices of the pain-bringers themselves raised in alarm and despair.

'Aelin'vath!' they were shouting, over and over.

He knew what it meant. The creature's blood in his veins was getting thicker – he was beginning to understand everything they were saying.

Dysjunction. That was what they were shouting. Dysjunction. But what did that mean?

He was tearing into the very heart of the slaughter. The scale of it was breathtaking – whole hosts of xenos bringing everything they had to bear on the enemy, unleashing negative-energy weapons, dimensional imploders, reality-rippers, and still it was not enough. Their city was being swallowed

up, spire by spire.

No wonder they were desperate. No wonder they wanted a deal with Raskian. But why? What could the Fabricator General possibly give them that could staunch this flood?

Now he was plummeting even further, down into the deepest pits, the oldest foundations, where the stale air tasted of ancient and eternal agonies. He glimpsed shafts running off into what felt like the roots of the galaxy itself, sunk into a primordial darkness that sucked the light out like a starving soul sucked in water.

They were building something down there. Millions of thralls, thousands of constructor-machines, all conjuring and reshaping and summoning. More esoteric vehicles were hovering over that one site than anywhere else he'd seen so far. An air of panic hung over the place. Just like every other edifice he'd witnessed, the scale was incredible. This was an immense effort, a huge programme, something launched in desperation and panic, its work continuing and expanding even as it came under repeated attack.

And then he recognised it. He saw the familiar tangle of components, the same frantic mix of arcane devices, all linked together in a forest of mind-bending complexity – a counterpart to the more ancient machine, now being constructed anew even as he watched, hastily, from looted parts and remade elements and reverse-engineered structures, straddling the breach into the seethe and churn of the warp itself.

Its function is misunderstood by your people, the creature had told him. *If you ever discovered the truth, it would, at the very least, rip your deluded empire in half.*

They needed this thing for the same reason that the Imperium needed it. The warp had erupted under Commorragh, and they needed a way to stop it.

And now he was speeding into the very core of it, just as Raskian's hololith had done, past power coils far more efficient than anything built on Mars, past objects so strange that he had no words to describe them. And at the very centre of the immense conglomeration, locked down under layer after layer of supporting structures, was a seat – a black throne, woven around with eldritch runes and psychic connectors, larger than any xenos could ever have sat in, already bursting with contained energies even before the machine was fully operational.

I know what they want, he thought, with a sudden, awful clarity. *Holy*

Terra, I know what they want.

Khazad heard footsteps pass outside the door more than once. She and Revus waited each time, not daring to breathe, eyes fixed on the tear-shaped portal. The footsteps went past, padding softly before fading away.

She resisted the urge to look at the objects in the chamber. She ignored the slowly decomposing remains on the creature's torture-table. She didn't look at any of the grotesque images that hung in the room's gloomy recesses. She concentrated on her exercises of preparation, on her readiness.

Revus did the same. The two of them stood in perfect silence, both focusing on the doorway. She had no idea how long they would be standing there. Maybe Crowl had gone forever, or maybe he would be back in a few moments.

She glanced at him. Maldo Revus, captain of storm troopers. She knew he'd started to doubt. She knew he felt easier with Spinoza now, who represented more what he thought an Imperial official ought to be. He had come, though. He had followed the order, right into the heart of this hideous place. He didn't have the full level of her specialist training, as formidable as he was in combat. He certainly didn't have the resources and conditioning of a Space Marine, nor a Custodian. Still, though. He was always *there*, hellgun held ready, never complaining.

She had cursed Terra many times, and it had always felt justified, but here was the best of it, right there, standing beside her in silent watchfulness. Across a million worlds of the Imperium were the other countless souls like him, unimaginative, competent, following orders given by those higher up, authorities who might have been gifted or corrupt or insane or brutal, but in all cases were to be obeyed.

They were always present, those souls, always in the line of fire. More so than inquisitors. More so than assassins. She was about to say something about that, because it suddenly felt important. She didn't even know how to articulate it, but her lips had started moving.

Then the noise came – another footfall, incautious, outside the door. She tensed immediately, only to see the tear-lens rippled away, revealing one of the xenos warriors.

Revus fired immediately, and yet still, somehow, the xenos evaded his perfectly aimed las-bolts. It moved so fast that it seemed to weave through

the light-bursts in translated shifts. Khazad interposed, angling her blade into the path of the xenos' curved scimitar. The two swords clashed in a jarring wrench, but by then it was already bending away from contact, slippery as an eel, darting further into the chamber.

Revus flew at it, firing close-range with one hand, slashing with his combat knife with the other. Khazad hacked and jabbed as fast as she had ever done, a flurry of movements that made her muscles shriek from exertion, and still they failed to land a blow. It was there, then not-there, a shadow, a puff of elusive smoke, its curved blade just a finger's-width from carving them both apart.

They tried to box it in. Revus was slower, but he was persistent, never retreating even though his carapace armour had already taken wicked hits. Khazad was faster but more brittle, more lethal but also more exposed to the counter-thrust. Both of them were fighting beyond themselves, sustaining a pitch of coordinated engagement that surely couldn't last long, and all they could do was contain it, keep it from cutting them into whirling shreds.

Then the xenos lashed out, batting the hellgun away and sending it clattering to the floor. Revus lunged with the knife, only for the xenos to swat it aside with its larger blade. Khazad pounced, seeing an opening, but the creature pivoted on a heel and lashed out with a boot. The kick connected with her midriff and sent her crashing straight into the table of hooks.

She couldn't recover in time. She saw Revus standing in the path of the blade, and could do nothing about it.

'Captain!' she cried, scrambling to her feet and already knowing she would be too late.

But none of them, not even the xenos, had seen what came out of the mirror, flying as if hurled by a pair of vengeful hands. It swept across the chamber, a ragged mass of torn cloak and battered armour, clutching an ancient pistol and with a look of fervent loathing on its ravaged face.

Crowl hit the xenos hard, driving the two of them across the chamber floor and skidding into a pillar. The creature was already twisting to get away when he rammed Sanguine into its open mouth and squeezed the trigger. Bullets at point-blank range did much the same to xenos brains as they did to human ones, and the two of them were briefly obscured by a splattered

cloud of blood and bone.

Revus immediately fell to his knees, panting hard. Khazad was barely better off – the brief contest had been savage.

‘You are… back, lord,’ she gasped.

But when Crowl looked up at her, it wasn’t immediately obvious *what* had come back. He’d looked cadaverous before, now he looked almost as bad as one of them. His cheeks were pits, his eyes were black, his dry flesh had lost its opacity amid trails of thrown alien gore.

‘Come with me,’ he croaked grimly, flecks of dark blood all across his face. ‘We end this now.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Spinoza's mind was whirling, her nerves stretched tight. Though she had been well versed in the Lex Imperialis from childhood, keeping up with the arguments was fearsomely difficult. Raskian and the Archon Shae-Morvain were formidable advocates, haggling over every point, something that exposed how little trust there was on either side. It was exhausting – every Mechanicus commitment was hedged with demands for concessions and guarantees, and the xenos were just as hard to break down. She began to understand why the whole process had taken so long – throw in problems with translation and the atmosphere of permanent and mutual aggression, and it was a wonder things had not broken down far earlier.

For all that she attempted to follow the tortuous arguments, though, her core focus remained on what was in the Mechanicus caskets.

'I have this right,' she whispered to Zijes, who was standing close by. 'Those contents are taken from the Throne itself?'

The inquisitor nodded. He was also watching the proceedings avidly, like a hawk seeking its prey. 'Redundant items from the existing machine-biological interface,' he said. 'Saved from the furnace to test out the replacements.'

Spinoza still couldn’t quite get her mind around that. Those things – those tubes, cables and fluid-cyclers – had once been part of the machinery connected to the living presence of the Emperor Himself. Perhaps they had never come into direct contact with His holy person, but they were elements of components that did. It felt absurdly sacrilegious to consider that there was a physical body of any kind at the heart of that monstrous agglomeration; even more to think that such things had been pulled out of it.

‘How can the Custodians countenance it?’ she murmured.

‘Because it has to be done here,’ Zijes said. ‘They cannot risk an untried implant into the real thing.’

That was what Raskian had told them, too – the testing would all take place in front of them, here, under the watchful supervision of priests who were as devoted to the Emperor’s divinity as she was herself. It had to happen – there could be no progress if the promised additions did not work – but it felt wildly, horrifically wrong. Disrespectful. A leap into the sordid world of the physical, when for her whole life the Emperor had been a spiritual icon, far removed from such mundane matters as flesh and blood.

She glanced over at Navradaran, who was still as silent and unmoving as a statue.

‘He will let it happen,’ she muttered, growing more agitated as every moment passed. ‘He would have signalled by now, if he were going to intervene.’

Zijes nodded grimly. ‘You might be right. Get ready to move.’

Still the tech-priests obsessed over every detail, and still the witch-creature at the archon’s side made objection after objection. The drone of officious voices became maddening, a babble of increasingly frayed irrelevances.

After what seemed like an eternity, though, Raskian himself finally broke the deadlock.

‘Your stipulation theta-aleph-nine-nine-eight is granted,’ the dwarf announced, its cables strobing wildly. ‘And resolution of that final matter brings us to the moment of compact. No exchange can proceed without the items in your possession being certified. Announce your intention – do you release them for scrutiny?’

Spinoza felt a lurch of dread. ‘It’s happening,’ she breathed.

‘We do,’ replied the archon through the translexers. ‘Let the procedure

begin.’

Spinoza looked at Navradaran, as did several of the tech-priests. The Custodian appeared lost in thought, weighing up everything that had transpired, but eventually gave Raskian a curt nod.

‘Holy hells,’ Zijes swore under his breath.

Raskian gave a single binharic command, and the great Mechanicus grav-crates hissed forward, their sides sliding down to reveal crystal stasis chambers within. As the contents were steadily revealed, the priesthood broke into fervent chanting. Censer-drones darted forward and doused the stasis-chambers with puffs of sanctified incense. The xenos warriors watched it all with a kind of bored contempt, all save the hovering witch-creature, who stared at the contents with an intent and fierce intelligence.

‘We need to move,’ Zijes hissed. ‘Now.’

Spinoza calculated the distances again. The Custodians were positioned between them and the caskets. As the grav-drives pushed them onward, six of them moved up alongside the structures, falling into a protective cordon alongside the dozens of skitarii escorts. Navradaran remained close to Raskian, watching it all unfold with glacial calm.

‘Too many,’ she whispered. ‘Let them get out into the open.’

She could sense the storm troopers around her straining at the leash, waiting for the order. Channa looked as desperate to move as her master did, but they all held position perfectly, their discipline holding.

Just as the Mechanicus’ caskets rumbled forward, the xenos counterpart glided forward to meet it. Its glossy exterior surface rippled, then broke into mottled patches, before becoming entirely transparent. Suspended within the crystalline tube were pieces of machinery. Like all such alien devices, they were composed of organic-looking twists and sweeps, a spidery mass of ceramic-like materials half lost behind shimmering force fields. Each piece was the size of a ground transport, held in place by a lattice of suspensors and glowing with the flicker of eldritch energies.

Raskian presided over it without speaking, any expression impossible to read – neither the bronze face of the dwarf nor the huge slab-sides of his true form gave anything away. The witch-creature and the archon also observed carefully, dark eyes steady as the containers moved slowly towards touching range. For the first time since this had started, Spinoza thought she detected something like anticipation there – nerves, even.

‘We’re not going to get a better chance,’ insisted Zijes. ‘I’m giving the order.’

The Mechanicus caskets were now out into the centre of the chamber, free of the Imperial lines but still surrounded by their honour guard escort.

‘The guards will have to pull away,’ insisted Spinoza, watching the Custodians’ movements intently. At the back of her mind was Crowl’s last injunction, nagging away, holding her back. *Wait. Wait as long as you possibly can*. ‘Just another moment.’

‘He’s not coming back,’ Zijes snapped, guessing her mind. ‘I’m going for it.’

‘Wait.’

The three caskets hovered closer to one another, the Mechanicus pair on humming grav-plates, the featureless xenos tube seeming to levitate of its own accord. The honour guard of skitarii scuttled clear at last. As the conjunction neared, the Custodians also fell back, opening up a narrow passage towards the caskets.

He will not return, thought Spinoza grimly. *We are out of time.*

The stasis fields began to tremble, winding down towards dissolution. A thin crack appeared at the leading edge of the first casket. The circular face of the xenos tube began to wobble, ready for its opening up.

‘Now!’ said Zijes, grabbing his laspistol.

He was right – the moment had come. With a rush of pre-combat endorphins, Spinoza activated Argent and opened her mouth to give the order.

‘Cease! Stop this now!’

A voice rang out across the entire chamber, startling Spinoza into silence. Her head snapped round to see Crowl striding out into the centre of the chamber, the narrow no-man’s-land between the two delegations. He had his pistol drawn. Revus and Khazad came with him, also bearing weapons. He looked absolutely furious, wilder and angrier than she had ever seen before. Dark veins bulged under his parchment-thin skin, and what remained of his hair fell about his face in greasy clumps.

‘Detain him!’ ordered Raskian, and fifty skitarii instantly moved to comply.

‘Hold!’ ordered Navradaran, and he gestured to his companions. Two of them, moving faster than any of the tech-guard, smoothly interposed

themselves between the parties, shielding Crowl from assault.

By then, the xenos had reacted too. ‘What is this?’ demanded the archon, her voice still emerging with a fractional delay through the translexers. ‘No more obstructions – all has been determined.’

‘No, he will be heard,’ countered Navradaran, striding down from his high position and to the forefront of the Imperial lines. All around him, Militarum and skitarii zeroed their weapons at the xenos ranks. Two further Custodians moved into position to protect Crowl, leaving four standing vigil close to the caskets. It suddenly felt like one false move, one twitchy trigger finger, might bring the whole thing crashing down around them.

‘You have been deceived!’ Crowl shouted across the chamber, flecks of blood and spittle flying from his mouth. He looked deranged, a true madman at last. ‘Do *not* open that thing! By the Emperor’s name, I shall kill the first one who tries!’

‘All is ordained, inquisitor,’ said Raskian. ‘You are clearly unwell. Withdraw now, and you shall not face further sanction.’

Crowl didn’t listen. He barely seemed aware of the Fabricator General’s presence. To the extent he was talking to anyone now, it was Navradaran. ‘They have made their own. Their own Throne. I have seen it, I have seen the work on it, and it is nearly finished.’ He stretched out a clawed hand, pointing at the archon in denunciation. ‘All lies! You said you wished to keep us alive. Maybe true, but this was never about us, was it? It was about you.’

Then Crowl whirled around to face the Custodian again. ‘Their city is under attack. Just like Terra, just like everywhere else. They are reeling. They are losing. The warp is spilling through every crack in their defences, and they need a way to staunch the flow.’ He began to choke, to throw up blood-spatters, but forced himself to keep going. ‘And that is what the Throne does, isn’t that right? It guards against destruction. It holds back the flood. It is the last, the best, shield against the ruin of the universe.’

He turned on Raskian at last, eyes staring, cloak flying out wildly. ‘And you taught them how!’ he shouted bitterly. ‘Everything you’ve given them, all those exchanges of data and schematics, it was just what they needed. They already know so much more than we do, and we gave away the few scraps they couldn’t work out themselves. You did it, my lord! You sold your birthright cheaply!’

The tech-priests started chattering nervously, sending tight bursts of binharic to one another. The caskets, so close to meeting, began to pull back, their stasis fields re-establishing.

'This is irrelevant,' the archon protested. 'What is, or is not, the case in Commorragh is none of your concern. We have here a simple exchange of goods, one that has been scrutinised over and over again. There is no risk to your Imperium in this. It must conclude, or our guarantees of protection here become void.'

Crowl laughed again, a horrible, stretched sound. 'None of our concern? None of our *concern?* You bolt together a cheap mockery of our holiest place and call it *none of our concern?*' He took an ominous step towards the xenos ranks, looking as if he wished to charge straight into them. 'Because you have been lying from the very start. All of it, lies. Your witch there even said it to my face. He said the Emperor we place so much store by is entirely irrelevant to the machine's ongoing function. And as soon as he told me that, I knew something was wrong, because I have *been* there. I have stood at the very doors of Eternity and felt the power of His matchless will in motion. So do not tell me that He is irrelevant, because He is *everything*. He powers it and He guides it. Without His unspeakable sacrifice, we are all of us consigned to damnation, and those who are not already heretics know it. A throne is nothing without a king.'

Now the Custodians were becoming more active. At some unspoken signal, their weapons moved into guard. Raskian started to get agitated, and more skitarii shuffled up to protect the retreating caskets. The xenos, by contrast, looked furious – all save the witch-creature, who merely observed with something like cool detachment.

'Complete the transaction,' the archon said, speaking directly to Raskian. 'I say it again – what happens in Commorragh has no bearing on this deal.'

'Oh, but it does,' said Crowl, now grinning dementedly, pacing back and forth like an advocate before the accused. 'Because there is one thing you do not have. One faculty that has withered you into nothing. You are masters of the material realm, that is certain. You are the destroyers of stars and the devourers of worlds, but you cannot stomach the warp. You have built a throne, but you cannot use it. You have made the seat, but cannot sit in it. Even the greatest of your kind, at the height of your race's dominance, would have struggled to occupy that machine, and now none of you is

strong enough for it. It is useless to you, a waste of all your sweat and toil – unless, that is, you create an Emperor of your own.'

That produced uproar. The skitarii surged forward, trying to get at him, and even some of the Militarum stirred into motion. A blare of alert-klaxons echoed across the chamber, deafening the shouts and bringing back only a slender veneer of order.

'Impossible,' said Raskian, though his voice now betrayed a sudden and terrible doubt. 'Nothing we have done makes such rank heresy anything close to realisation. You have strayed into madness, inquisitor.'

Crowl never looked at him. He was staring at the witch-creature now, still grinning, though there was only malice in the expression. A line of black drool ran down his chin. 'A mere drop of blood,' he quoted back, his voice soft and vicious. 'Did you know that? Just a single drop – enough to wind body and soul back around, remaking an entire life, should you know what you are doing.' He turned back to Navradaran. 'It's all they need, Custodian. A cell or two. Maybe a strand of chromosomes. As long as they are denied that, their project fails. But give them just that, a mere stain on some ancient equipment, a speck of dry plasma on redundant tubing only required for routine tests, and they can work horrors beyond imagination.'

'It could not be done,' Navradaran said, though his calm voice was now shot through with terrible doubt.

'They only need something to power it,' Crowl told him. 'Just a shell, an agonised lump of flesh and mind, enough to fool the interfaces and channel its dormant psychic might. It would be an abomination, a mockery and a blasphemy, but it would have His blood within it, His gene-patterns, and a foul copy of His immortal strength – nothing else will do. It is the only thing they require. Be in no doubt, they would move the heavens themselves to achieve it.'

Crowl pulled himself up to his full height at last, pointing accusingly at the caskets containing their tubes and cyclers. 'So *destroy it!*' he thundered. 'Destroy it now! *Toto en infernis!* Commit it to the flame! Or every soul in this chamber will be the author of such heresy that we shall deserve to be cast into the hells our hosts already inhabit!'

Spinoza didn't react in time. Zijes didn't react, nor did any of the Mechanicus forces – it was as if they had been frozen, locked into a tight vice of indecision while they processed the terrible, mind-paralysing

possibility that any of this were true.

The Custodians suffered no such qualms. As one, coordinated perfectly and with startling speed, they swivelled their guardian spears around and sent a storm of bolts into the Mechanicus grav-caskets. For a second or two, the armoured casing resisted the onslaught before the structure imploded and the contents blew apart in a hot orgy of kindling plasma. The rain of shells continued, provoking a firestorm out of the structure's motive units that immolated everything inside.

The xenos didn't counter immediately. The archon watched it happen. Her witch-creature watched it happen. The warriors, no longer bored at least, made no move to stop it.

The echoes of destruction faded away, and the smell of burned metal filled the chamber. Raskian said nothing. Navradaran and his brotherhood took up defensive positions, spears held ready. The Imperial ranks drew their weaponry in a serried clatter of metal and plasteel.

Then the archon raised her armoured fist, held it out in front of her, and clenched it tight.

'Agony, then,' she said coldly. 'For all of you.'

Revus found himself almost laughing as the chamber exploded into anarchy around him. Crowl had been right. Right all along. He dragged the inquisitor down out of harm's way, using his own armoured body to shield him. The man weighed less than he should have done, as if he'd somehow wasted away inside that armour. He coughed up blood as the gravitic weapons started buzzing and the bolters opened fire.

Revus couldn't even see what the xenos were doing by then, only that every Imperial warrior in the place was firing frantically now, pulling back to Raskian's position, only too aware of their precarious situation. Whatever fragile concords had existed were now broken, shattered the moment Crowl had exposed the true nature of the plan. The skitarii, Militarum, storm troopers and Custodians unloaded everything they had at the hated xenos, and that was almost cathartic to see – so much pent-up suspicion and low-level loathing, now set free to find its target.

Khazad was at his side then, helping him drag Crowl away from danger. Screams had already broken out, some of them from machine-filtered voice boxes, indicating that the xenos were coming for them.

‘Get him to the interrogator,’ Khazad said.

The two of them hustled Crowl’s limp form back towards the chamber’s exits. A Custodian piled past them the other way, racing into close contact with the oncoming xenos monsters. Something huge engaged it, a vile obscenity of vat-grown muscle and poisoned spines, and the two of them fell into blistering, frenetic combat. Revus got a fractured glimpse of furious spear-thrusts, wild swipes that carved into vat-bulked flesh, before a gang of charging skitarii blocked the view.

They staggered closer to safety. Through a scrum of bodies, Revus made out Raskian’s enormous core-structure being hauled away from danger by tractor-units, and more skitarii piling into the chamber from all corners. Munitions went off, shattering all the lumens and plunging the chamber into a neon-flashed arena of darkness. He heard Navradaran ordering the fightback, his huge voice rising above the roar of confusion and explosives, as well as tech-priests screaming out static-laced orders in a language he didn’t understand.

By that point, Crowl was barely breathing. His armour was a bloody mess, slippery to hold on to, and he hardly seemed aware of where he was. The strength needed for his final oration seemed to have exhausted what few reserves of energy he still had, and his boots slipped and tripped as he tried to push himself along.

It was hard to find the way out. The entire chamber was crowded with panicked or furious bodies, most racing into combat, a few trying to get out, some just disorientated and unsure where to aim. The xenos were in close now, flitting through the darkness like sentient shadows, slicing and punching. Clouds of gas and smoke billowed out, clogging helm-visors and turning everything darker. It suddenly felt like there were dozens of enemies, as if they had been waiting all along in hidden caches, and Revus caught snatched glimpses of lithe-limbed nightmares writhing and pirouetting out of the boiling smog.

Then he saw Spinoza. She rushed towards him with the remains of Courvain’s storm trooper squad – Slovia, Gereg and Marax – as well as a furious Gorgias.

‘With me!’ she shouted, her crozius aflame in her clenched gauntlets. She cast a worried glance at Crowl. ‘He lives still?’

‘Just,’ said Khazad.

‘Then we get him out.’

They pushed on, the storm troopers forming up around them and launching fusillades of las-fire at anything that got close. They were almost at the portal when a xenos warrior caught up, leaping clean out of the las-fire-lit dust and going straight for Crowl.

Revus fired and missed. It downed a storm trooper before skittering in close, its eyes wide with anticipation of the kill. Spinoza intercepted it, flinging Argent into its path, but the xenos arced away, slipping under the strike before pouncing straight at the inquisitor, nothing between it and the target.

Then something huge rushed past, something heavy and moving incredibly fast. Revus saw a golden blur, a speed-smeared flicker, before Navradaran crashed into the xenos amid an explosion of plasma discharge. The two of them fell straight into dazzling combat, so fast that only the barest fraction of it was even visible – a poison-blade flashing out, a spear spinning on its axis. The xenos screamed wildly, a cry of rage and excitement and fear, accelerating into a brace of attacks so vicious that it seemed to defy comprehension. For a terrible moment, Revus thought that even the Custodian might be overwhelmed by that – but then Navradaran struck back. Not quite as fast, perhaps, not quite as artful, but strong, so incredibly strong – the spear tip plunged clean into the xenos’ midriff, the creature’s trajectory anticipated and its fragile armour shattered. Navradaran wrenched the blade clear, severing the creature in half and silencing its yowls.

The Custodian threw the xenos’ blood from his blade and turned to Spinoza.

‘You have him?’ he demanded.

‘We do,’ said Spinoza.

‘Then get him away from here. All of you, get out. This must be reported back on Terra.’

‘And you?’

‘The High Lord cannot be taken alive. We shall attempt to extract him. If that fails, we will destroy the entire place.’

So calm, even amid all the ruin. ‘Then may He be with you, lord Custodian,’ Spinoza said, bowing respectfully.

Navradaran charged off, powering into the dark, his spear already whirling around him again. Revus got a final view of the chamber roof starting to

disintegrate – a rapidly collapsing space of growing terror and bloodshed with xenos warriors running amok among the raging skitarii while fires kindled and explosions raged.

They ran as hard as they could, staying together as the floor drummed and the walls shook. They reached the slide doors and kept on going, stumbling and staggering into the corridors outside with Crowl in tow. Fresh explosions blew out a wall section on their left-hand side, and a brace of broken bodies flew through the gap. Those were all storm troopers, and in their wake came more of them – Channa's troops, firing frantically at the oncoming enemy as they backed away. Zijes was with them, holding them together, shouting furious denunciations against the alien as he fired his laspistol two-handed. Revus had to hand it to him – he was a ferocious shot.

'We have to get out!' Spinoza roared at him over the noise.

He looked reluctant for a split second – retreat was anathema to all their instincts, but then one of the hideous vat-bulked monsters lurched its way up to the breach in the wall section, crushing and smashing anything in its path, the remains of several skitarii hanging from its claws.

'Charges!' yelled Zijes, and his troops immediately hurled zero-count frag grenades into the breach. The creature was obscured by a rippling bloom of explosions, and howled with pain and rage. It was still coming at them, though, right until the entire corridor section collapsed on top of it, and cracks raced out along the ceiling as the rubble-chunks smashed down.

The whole place was coming apart now, its hasty construction no match for the munitions being deployed by all forces. As the floor itself began to buckle, Zijes finally ordered the retreat, and his forces – no more than a dozen by then – joined the hurried race to the exits.

Revus and Khazad kept hauling Crowl, keeping a tight grip on his armour-plates. As they staggered and lurched, Crowl seemed to recover something of his awareness.

'Captain,' he slurred, looking up at Revus. 'No need… to bring me. Save yourself.'

'With all respect, lord,' Revus said between snatched breaths, jaw clenched tight, 'shut your mouth.'

They were getting close to the enclosure's perimeter gate now. Dust was already shaking loose from the ceiling and the cracks in the floor-panels had widened. Khazad tripped as a large plate suddenly tilted, bringing all three

of them crashing to the deck. Other hands immediately reached out for the inquisitor – Spinoza herself, plus one of Channa's command – and they raced on towards the gate. Revus scrambled back to his feet to catch up, only to see the wall giving way just ahead. The corridor filled with a cataract of debris, and more heavy explosions went off from all around him.

Half-blinded, he reached out for Khazad, snatching her close to him as one of the supporting pillars buckled. The two of them scrambled back the way they had come, racing against the gathering collapse of the structure around them. He lost sight of those he had been with – had they pushed on through?

He pulled himself to his feet, groggily trying to get a sense of what had happened. Khazad rose beside him. They had been cut off – the route to the portal was entirely blocked by the masonry landslide, and from the other side he could hear the grind and smash of larger sections coming down.

'They got out?' Khazad demanded, her armour covered in dust and flecks of rubble.

'They did,' Revus confirmed, picking up faint signals from the far side.

'Then we blast it – won't take much.'

But now Revus' armour was picking up new readings, many of them, racing down the corridor the way they had just come. Those were moving too fast to be Imperial. 'Negative,' he said, slamming a fresh power pack into his hellgun. 'We buy them time.'

Khazad stared at him for a moment, then clearly detected the same signals. She kindled the energy field of her blade, swivelled around and assumed her familiar combat stance. The two of them backed up towards the heap of rubble, tensing for what they knew would spin out of the darkness at any moment.

'Captain,' Khazad murmured, her voice full of dark amusement. 'I say just one thing to you now.'

'What?' asked Revus, suddenly thinking of Terra then, the only home he'd ever known.

'Our children,' she said, 'would have been formidable.'

He laughed out loud at that, even as the xenos came for them, bounding and dancing out of the flickering shadows, moving at full tilt with that otherworldly mix of grace and horror, their helm-slits glowing with a sickening pale blue light.

They had been terrifying before. Not now, though. Never again. Revus and Khazad leapt to meet them, hellgun and blade moving together in alignment, slotting into the coordination they had almost mastered before. As the xenos slammed in close, captain and assassin fought them back, as good in that moment as any mortal humans had ever been, still laughing together as they fought, unbroken, united, and perfect at last.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Spinoza reeled as the gate collapsed behind her. Had it been booby-trapped? Hit somehow by the xenos? She was thrown from her feet by the afterblasts, her grip on Crowl loosened, her body sent flying. Others were less fortunate – she glimpsed Channa being struck by flying rockcrete, others crushed beneath the rolling mass of broken masonry.

Her helm-lens fizzed with static, then cleared up to reveal a long crack across the visor's armaglass. She frantically kindled her lumen-beam again, twisting around to see who had got through.

Gorgias whizzed overhead, beside himself with fury and panic. Zijes was still on his feet, along with a few disorientated troopers. Crowl was moving. He was getting to his knees, shaking his head, long trails of blood looping from his mouth.

Zijes reached out for Spinoza, dragged her up. 'I'm getting multiple readings in pursuit,' he said. 'We have to keep going.'

She blinked hard, trying to clear her head. It looked like only eight of them had got out. Where was Revus? Khazad? 'Must go ba–' she started.

'No,' Zijes said firmly. 'No. Too many, moving too fast. We keep going. You hear me? We *keep going.*'

He was right. Even as she reached out for Crowl again, Spinoza's damaged detectors picked up the same thing – xenos runes swarming up to the smashed portal. Would it hold them long? Were there any survivors on the far side?

Zijes scooped a hand under Crowl's armpit, and the two of them dragged him out into the webway tunnel. The surviving storm troopers limped along with them, Gorgias bobbing drunkenly overhead, as if he'd taken a hit too.

They went as fast as they could, but it was torture. Spinoza felt blood in her greaves, and guessed she'd picked up a fracture. The crushing sense of oppression she remembered from the inward journey returned with a vengeance. This place had hated them before, and now, given what they had done, it positively loathed them. They all limped and staggered through the gathering mists, trying not to think too hard about what was surely coming after them.

For some reason, the pursuers didn't catch up immediately. Against the odds, something must have still been holding them up. So they made progress, recovering from the worst of the shock and pushing on as fast as they could down the long, winding corridors. Spinoza found herself starting to plan again, the instinct for survival kicking in.

'We need to find a way out,' she panted at Zijes.

'Agreed. Is that easy?'

She had no answer to that. The only chance was to move as rapidly as they could, try to find some hint of an exit. There had to *be* exits – the ways the xenos came and went, just like on Luna. If need be, they might even be able to make it back to the one they'd entered by, though that felt like a long way off. The first hint of a portal, any kind of portal, and they'd have to take it, and worry after that about where they had landed.

Crowl was breathing, and that was something. He was trying to walk now, to help them out, but it was clear his strength had gone.

'The Custodian,' he murmured.

'Remained inside,' Spinoza reminded him. 'And if anyone can look after themselves, it's him.'

Crowl's expression crumpled, as if that was the first time he'd realised what Navradaran had done.

They kept moving. The mists grew thicker, harder to penetrate, and their pace slowed. Breathing got harder as the air curdled with foul perfume, and

the tinkling music started up again, just as hateful and distracting as before.

Zijes started to struggle. Spinoza was already struggling. The few troops with them were all carrying injuries, by their look, and even Gorgias appeared to be working hard to stay aloft.

When the final explosion went off, it took them all by surprise. The colossal boom rang out from a long way back, echoing up the tunnel and making the ribbed walls shake. Shredded mist-clots dispersed ahead of them, drumming like sand on a grav-plate. Aftershocks resonated after it, surging through the wobbling air, and the ground underfoot shuddered and trembled.

Spinoza halted, turning back. Zijes did the same, listening intently as the dull booms gradually faded away.

‘Navradaran,’ she said softly.

They waited for a little longer, in silence. The final echoes of destruction shimmered into nothing.

‘You think he took them all out?’ Zijes asked, his voice giving away his hope that it was so.

Spinoza shook her head, unwilling to believe it. ‘Let us not wait to find out.’

They pushed off again, the weight between them somehow worse now, their fatigue growing ever greater. Crowl had started to gurgle by then. He reached up with his battered gauntlet, tugging at her shoulder.

‘It is…’ he rasped.

‘A moment,’ Spinoza said to Zijes, and they halted. Crowl let go of her arm.

‘It is coming,’ said Crowl.

‘The witch?’

‘It can sense me.’ His face looked to be more congealed blood than skin now. ‘It will not stop.’

‘I will not leave you.’

‘You must.’ He sank down to his haunches, his breathing ragged. ‘Terra must be told. The Throne is still failing, and all those who took that seriously are dead now. A solution must still be found. One guided by faith.’

Spinoza knelt down beside him. ‘Your testimony will be required. Come now – you have the strength.’

Crowl smiled, exposing toothless gums. When had he lost his teeth? She could make out the bones under his stretched skin. ‘I am already dead, Spinoza. But you are not.’ He drew in a gurgling breath. ‘It wants me more than you. I can delay it. You *must go*.’

A forced laugh of dismissal. ‘No. I came a long way to find you.’

‘Yes, and that saved everything. Of all my mistakes, my many mistakes, leaving you was the worst.’ He placed his hand on hers. ‘You excelled. Know that.’

Then she felt the most treacherous thing of all – tears spiking at the corners of her eyes. That was weakness, unforgivable weakness, but still they came.

‘You said once you wished to mould me,’ she said. ‘You may have succeeded.’

‘Yes, you were insufferable when you arrived.’ He tried to smile again, and failed. ‘But now you must live.’

She needed to leave. Zijes was getting impatient.

She didn’t want to. Against all her training, all her old inclinations, she wanted to stay.

‘Erasmus Crowl,’ she said, her voice breaking. ‘There, I said it at last.’

‘At last. Now *go.*’

After that she was rising, almost automatically, moving again, feeling Zijes’ impatience to be off. She saw Gorgias dip down for some final words with Crowl, and couldn’t hear what they said, only that the skull was eloquent, somehow, and Crowl was reaching up to it, and she couldn’t bear to look.

Then she was striding out, hurrying again, knowing that every second was dangerous, and Zijes was doing the same, as were all the survivors. The tunnels extended out ahead of them, twisting and turning, leading only into a maze of malign intelligence that wanted very badly to kill them all. She had to focus, to plan, to lead them to safety so that all this labour would not be wasted. The Throne depended on it. The Imperium depended on it.

But right then, even as she made her way with commitment into the darkness, all she felt was emptiness, the tears coming now, the grief for a soul discovered, then estranged, then at the end, when all was repaired, lost forever.

After she left, silence.

The tunnel stretched away in darkness around him. He lay back, resting his battered body against its concave surface. The fronds of mist reached up to encase him, sinking slowly like fetters over his broken limbs.

It was a blessed relief, to rest. He listened to the progress of the others as they ran off into the gloom, hanging on to the sounds for as long as he could. After that, nothing. Even the music seemed to have stilled. Or maybe he was just incapable of hearing it.

It felt like a long time before anything came to disturb that silence. He tried to remain conscious, and that was hard, because everything inside him was broken.

He remembered her. The one he had loved, so long ago. The one he could have followed into the void before Terra had fully gripped him, keeping him locked down in that mire of petty heresy and moral failure. He remembered all the years of bitterness, of regret at the chances missed, of the wreck of his life and his vocation. If he closed his eyes, he could still see her, turning back to face him at the space port. He had been so strong, then, so willing to believe in the institutions around him, in the promise of renewal. It had taken a long time for that to erode, to harden into the cynicism that he had been so mistakenly proud of.

All gone now. All that grief, the anguish, washed away, replaced by other discoveries and surprises. Most of all, that even within the rotting corpse of the Imperium he served, the one he knew full well concealed only canker at its hollow heart, there were still things that somehow survived all the madness. Loyalty. Defiance. Bravery.

One gift given, he thought. *Another returned.*

He heard the creature scuttling for him long before he saw it. It must have been badly wounded during the fighting in the enclosure, for its preternatural speed had been dented. It limped up the tunnel, hissing and gasping.

He waited for it, finally seeing a half-destroyed wretch emerge from the murk. Its pale skin was blackened with bruises and lacerations. Some of its extra limbs had been ripped away, and its fragile, glossy armour had been punched with many holes. It no longer hovered, but crawled, its black tongue lolling. In its bony claws it carried flensing knives. Its dark eyes blazed with a cold hatred.

The xenos closed on Crowl’s position, then squatted before him, long

limbs folded up like a spider's.

'They left you behind, I see,' it rasped, regarding him with undisguised loathing.

'I sent them on,' he replied.

'They will still be overtaken,' it said. 'The webway is alive with my people.'

'Don't be so sure. She's very good.'

The creature lost its balance, slipping over into the condensate. It looked in terrible shape. 'You were a fool, inquisitor. That bargain would have worked for you. Your Throne would have been saved.'

Crowl thought on that. Another lie? Maybe, though the creature had little reason to lie now. He let his head fall back against the tunnel wall, felt his eyes closing.

'You told me we only wished to remain in existence for the sake of it,' he croaked. 'You were very proud of that observation. That we would do anything to cling on. Just as you would.' He opened his eyes again, and looked at it. 'But you were wrong. There are things we will not do. Because we are alive still. Not revenants. Not ghouls whose time in this galaxy is long gone. *Alive*. You'll never understand that, because for you, life has become just another force to twist and break. But it means something to us. We may be weak now, and corrupt, and ignorant, but we're still here. And when your foul kingdom is nothing but a memory of fear, we'll still be here. You must hate that. But you need to be told it, because it's true.'

The xenos' face twisted further into a mask of antipathy, its mortified skin crumpling, tearing at the edges. For just a moment, you could see how beautiful that face had once been, millennia ago – so perfect that it would have taken the breath away just to witness – now ruined beyond any possible redemption.

'I considered letting you live,' it said, bringing its scalpels up, 'if you'd begged me to. A pet, or a toy, maybe – something to pass the long nights with in Commorragh. Now, I regret that you shall be introduced to pain the like of which no soul has known since the creation of your wretched kind.'

Crowl coughed up a laugh at that, and reached inside his ripped cloak. He withdrew a spiked tetrahedron from its folds, and flicked one of the nodes on its rune-engraved surface.

'A Dark Gate, I think you call these?' he said, amused with himself.

‘Careless, to leave one out in your chamber.’

The creature’s eyes suddenly widened, horrific realisation sparking within its hateful mind. ‘No, you do not understand what it–’

Crowl flicked another switch. He knew exactly what he was doing – just one more of the gifts this foul thing had given him.

‘I don’t think I’ll survive the transition,’ he said. ‘But I reckon you might.’

Then he depressed a rune, and the tunnel exploded with a blotchy orb of nightshade energy. The sphere of dislocation flew out, enveloping both of them in a howl of null-energies before ripping both their bodies apart and sending the slivers spiralling far into the depths of the webway’s furthest reaches.

Then the gale blew out, and the energies gusted away, leaving only the tetrahedron itself, which fell to the tunnel floor, rocked on its edge for a moment, then clinked softly to a halt.

They caught up.

Of course they did – this was *their* place. Spinoza cursed herself for beginning to hope. Crowl had been as good as his word – the witch-creature never reached them. For a while it felt like they might actually make it, for the tunnels branched and twisted and they appeared to be making progress. In the distance a faint glow appeared, the heat flicker of something in the mist – a portal, perhaps, a way out.

They ran for it – Zijes, Spinoza, the handful of storm troopers, Gorgias wheeling overhead. A new aroma swelled up to meet them – not the sickly-sweet taste of this place, but the mulch and spoor of another world, a *real* world, one that turned on its axis under the stars.

A host of desperate thoughts immediately crowded into her mind. Just as Crowl had impressed on her, the Imperium had to be warned. For all his hubris, the Fabricator General had been right about the Throne. It was dying, and a clear chance to save it had gone. That had been correct, Spinoza was sure, because even to contemplate what the xenos were planning filled her with horror. All the same, while an abomination had been prevented from coming into existence, the survival of the species still lay in the balance.

What to do next? If they got out, somehow made it back to Terra, would anyone believe them? Would anyone even listen? They had to formulate

some kind of plan, some way to survive, to get out, to find a way home and deliver the news.

So they ran as hard as they could in their battered armour, every limb flaring with pain, every lung burning from exertion.

But it wasn't enough. Even as the glow strengthened, and the outline of a curved gate finally loomed up out of the mist and shadow, the xenos overtook them. Not many, just a fragment of those assembled in the compound, but enough – screaming into contact, leaping out, seemingly, from the webway walls themselves, blades already whirring.

Zijes fired first, hitting one full in the face and sending the creature tumbling back into the condensation. Hells, he was fast. The storm troopers opened fire in all directions, filling the narrow tunnel with las-beams, some of them scoring hits.

Spinoza whirled to see one of them come for her – a spindly horror clad in a circlet of linked spikes. It fired something – a needle-gun, maybe – and her armour took a brace of hits. Ignoring those, she flung Argent at it, her fury propelling the blow harder and faster than any she'd yet managed. The energy-crowned head connected, smashing the xenos' fragile skull and sending the broken body slamming into the webway wall.

She swung back around, looking for more targets. She heard Gorgias wailing, either from fury or pain, and saw the last storm troopers being cut down by flying splinters. A xenos warrior pounced right into the heart of them, slicing through carapace plate and spraying blood. Zijes managed to hit another one before a barbed and twisted grapple punched into his thigh. A metallic cable yanked tight, and he was pulled from his feet and reeled off into the dark.

Spinoza saw spiny hands reach out to grab him, clawing frantically to take him alive. His bloodied, helm-less face stared at her, wide-eyed with horror. She switched out Argent, grabbed her laspistol and shot him through the forehead.

Then she was running – sprinting for the gate as fast as she could, her ears filled with screams and las-bursts and the wicked laughs of their hunters.

The Imperium must be told, she recited to herself, over and over, as if the words themselves could propel her to safety.

She heard Gorgias close by, wailing now in unmistakable confusion and pain. The webway filled with wild light – energy weapons, distorting the

entire space, making the tunnel floor ripple and the walls pop.

She stumbled, feeling a hot rush of pain in her leg. The gate was just ahead of her, its aperture swimming with translucent plasma. She risked a look back. They were bounding after her, leaping like simians from wall to wall, their blood-soaked weapons flashing in the dark.

She ran. She ran even though her body was breaking, every muscle in agony, every joint aflame.

The Imperium must be told.

Something spiked and agonising hit her. She wasn't going to make it.

The Imperium must be told.

Gorgias' screams abruptly died out. She fell, the gate just metres away. She looked up at it, desperate, distraught now, dragging her way to the threshold.

The Imperium must be told.

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EPILOGUE

The sun was beginning to sink on Terra. Not that the sun itself was visible, of course – the diffuse grey light merely faded, first in the east, then bleeding out of the sky through the narrow gaps in the endless sea of spires.

Arx sat at her desk. The hummingbird flitted around her chambers, eventually alighting on a bookcase. Its jewelled eye scrutinised its surroundings beadily.

A chime sounded, and Yellan, her adjutant, entered the room.

‘High Lord,’ he said, bowing.

She acknowledged him with a nod, reaching for the data-slates he had come to collect.

‘Will this be all?’ he asked.

Arx looked up at him. ‘Just the start, I fear. We’ll all be working harder than ever before. Can you even imagine it?’ She leaned back in her chair. She was extremely tired, but still had much to do.

Everything had changed. The primarch had returned. She had not believed the rumours at first, not until she’d seen him for herself, and even then she had run a whole series of psycho-illusion tests to be sure that it wasn’t a monstrous trick. Some mortal perils had been quelled with his arrival, as if

by the flick of godlike fingers, but others remained, and new ones were sprouting. It was a blessing, but also a danger.

If nothing else, it made all the old stratagems obsolete. It upended schemes and it birthed new ones. Already there were murmurs of discontent on the Council, as well as cries of relief and joy – a new age of politics was dawning.

As for herself, she wasn't sure what to think yet. The Inquisitorial mind did not welcome change, especially a change that might dilute the power of the institution. And yet, thinking back to when the Beacon had been extinct and anarchy had reigned unchecked, it was hard not to see the upsides.

'I trust you have heard nothing from Zijes?' she asked.

'We continue to make enquiries. Some reports did reach us – material from agents in the Mechanicus, rumours of a disturbance on Luna. Nothing concrete.'

'Luna? You mean the gateway?'

'Presumably. It has been completely destroyed now, I can report – orders of the primarch. The tech-priests didn't like that, they tell me, but it's been done.'

'Good. An outrage that it existed at all. We must accelerate plans to cordon the affected zones off entirely.' She thought on that for a moment. The Rift opening, the business with the Astronomican, the sudden discovery of the portal, the arrival of the primarch. All part of the same pattern of events, it was clear, though not all the links were obvious yet.

'Do you wish to maintain an open file on it?' Yellan asked. 'The Franck Inquest?'

She nodded. 'I do. If Zijes does not report soon, I shall have to seek another inquisitor to take it on. But mark it as Routine, if you will.'

They both knew what that meant. It would be buried, lost in the thousands upon thousands of open investigations, the records stowed away unless and until some hardy soul dared to uncover it again.

Because, in truth, who now cared about what Franck had been up to? Who cared if Interrogator Spinoza were still alive, and if she had had something to do with the Beacon going dark? All was restored now. Rumours of a new war were already swirling. A crusade, even. A great period of restoration, they were saying, after so long in slow decay.

Many souls had been lost. Millions had died, and most would never be

missed. But things would go on now, just as they were before – the Throne Eternal, rewarding faith and castigating vice. That was something to be certain of, to place one's faith in. Some truths, at least, never altered.

'And, if I may, any news of the Fabricator General?' Yellan asked.

'No, and that is irritating,' said Arx. 'Council must be convened, and his absence makes that impossible. I should wish to forge some kind of unity among us, some amity, however fragile, before events overtake us again, but I get nothing from Mars. Nothing at all.'

'Then I shall continue to make investigations.'

Arx rose from her seat. 'Please do.' She moved from behind the desk, and the hummingbird came to rest on her shoulder. 'As for now, I have my own appointment to keep. With the primarch himself, would you believe.'

Yellan raised an eyebrow. Like so many others in the service of the Senatorum, he harboured his own doubts about the provenance of the one calling himself Guilliman, though it was already becoming dangerous to express them.

'Anything of importance?' he asked.

'He wishes to reform things.' Arx gave her adjutant a knowing look. 'We'll see how that goes.'

The sun was also setting elsewhere, on a world that was hot, and humid, and clogged with foliage. A pale pink sky was mottled with high cirrus clouds, and flocks of birds flapped slowly north, calling out with strange voices. Far away, deep into the wide valley, a group of saurians were making their ponderous way towards a river-line, long prehensile necks swaying as their bodies moved.

The air was rich with smells, all of them flora and fauna, the kind of super-abundance of life that had been extinguished from so many worlds of the galaxy. Unfamiliar stars were already coming out in the dusky twilight. No sign of intelligent life was visible from that vantage, just the tangle and twist of root and branch, all of it teeming with calls and echoes.

No sign? Not quite true. A great stone arch did exist, covered in mats of lichen and cracked with age, its enormous blocks scored with wind-worn runes. Once it might have stood proudly alone on a great plain, but now its surfaces were clogged with ivy and its interior was hung with loops of dark vines.

Just in front of the arch, on a patch of exposed stone that had somehow escaped the slow creep of moss and ferns, a servo-skull lay immobile. Its mechanical parts steamed gently, as if it had passed through some enormous heat, or had been subject to some kind of furious energy-weapons fire. Its lone oculus flickered erratically, giving away the exhaustion of its power pack and the damage to its conductors. Its grav-plates were twisted and useless.

It was alone. Discarded. Perhaps soon one of those saurians would lumber up to it and take a sniff, for it very much did not look like it belonged on that world.

Something about its vox-emitter seemed to have got stuck. The noise it made was barely audible, just a hiss of expired machine parts. If you got closer, though, you could just about make out words. Repeated, over and over, as if whatever glimmer of intelligence left in the battered cranial unit thought it terribly important that someone listened.

'Summum recordare,' it was saying, desperately, though there was no one at all around to hear. *'Summum recordare.'*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Warhawk*, *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novels *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf* and *Jaghatai Khan: Warhawk of Chogoris*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm*, *Wolf King* and *Valdor: Birth of the Imperium*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *The Helwinter Gate*, *The Lords of Silence*, *Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne*, *Vaults of Terra: The Hollow Mountain*, *Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor's Legion*, *Watchers of the Throne: The Regent's Shadow* and many more. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, and the Warhammer Crime novel *Bloodlines*. Chris lives and works in Bradford-on-Avon, in south-west England.

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An extract from *Xenos*.

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Hunting the recidivist Murdin Eyclone, I came to Hubris in the Dormant of 240.M41, as the Imperial sidereal calendar has it.

Dormant lasted eleven months of Hubris's twenty-nine month lunar year, and the only signs of life were the custodians with their lighted poles and heat-gowns, patrolling the precincts of the hibernation tombs.

Within those sulking basalt and ceramite vaults, the grandees of Hubris slept, dreaming in crypts of aching ice, awaiting Thaw, the middle season between Dormant and Vital.

Even the air was frigid. Frost encrusted the tombs, and a thick cake of ice covered the featureless land. Above, star patterns twinkled in the curious, permanent night. One of them was Hubris's sun, so far away now. Come Thaw, Hubris would spin into the warm embrace of its star again.

Then it would become a blazing globe. Now it was just a fuzz of light.

As my gun-cutter set down on the landing cross at Tomb Point, I had pulled on an internally heated bodyskin and swathes of sturdy, insulated foul weather gear, but still the perilous cold cut through me now. My eyes watered, and the tears froze on my lashes and cheeks. I remembered the details of the cultural brief my savant had prepared, and quickly lowered my frost visor, trembling as warm air began to circulate under the plastic mask.

Custodians, alerted to my arrival by astropathic hails, stood waiting for me at the base of the landing cross. Their lighted poles dipped in obeisance in the frozen night and the air steamed with the heat that bled from their cloaks. I nodded to them, showing their leader my badge of office. An ice-car awaited: a rust-coloured arrowhead twenty metres long, mounted on ski-blade runners and spiked tracks.

It carried me away from the landing cross and I left the winking signal lights and the serrated dagger-shape of my gun-cutter behind in the perpetual winter night.

The spiked tracks kicked up blizzards of rime behind us. Ahead, despite the lamps, the landscape was black and impenetrable. I rode with Lores Vibben and three custodians in a cabin lit only by the amber glow of the craft's control panel. Heating vents recessed in the leather seats breathed out warm, stale air.

A custodian handed back a data-slate to Vibben. She looked at it cursorily and passed it on to me. I realised my frost visor was still down. I raised it and began to search my pockets for my eye glasses.

With a smile, Vibben produced them from within her own swaddled, insulated garb. I nodded thanks, put them on my nose and began to read.

I was just calling up the last plates of text when the ice-car halted.

'Processional Two-Twelve,' announced one of the custodians.

We dismounted, sliding our visors down into place.

Jewels of frost-flakes fluttered in the blackness about us, sparkling as they crossed through the ice-car's lamp beams. I've heard of bitter cold. Emperor grace me I never feel it again. Biting, crippling, actually bitter to taste on the tongue. Every joint in my frame protested and creaked.

My hands and my mind were numb.

That was not good.

Processional Two-Twelve was a hibernation tomb at the west end of the great Imperial Avenue. It housed twelve thousand, one hundred and forty-two members of the Hubris ruling elite.

We approached the great monument, crunching up the black, frost-coated steps.

I halted. 'Where are the tomb's custodians?'

'Making their rounds,' I was told.

I glanced at Vibben and shook my head. She slid her hand into her fur-edged robes.

'Knowing we approach?' I urged, addressing the custodian again. 'Knowing we expect to meet them?'

'I will check,' said the custodian, the one who had circulated the slate. He pushed on up the steps, the phosphor light on his pole bobbing.

The other two seemed ill at ease.

I beckoned to Vibben, so she would follow me up after the leader.

We found him on a lower terrace, gazing at the strewn bodies of four custodians, their light poles fizzling out around them.

‘H-how?’ he stammered.

‘Stay back,’ Vibben told him and drew her weapon. Its tiny amber Armed rune glowed in the darkness.

I took out my blade, igniting it. It hummed.

The south entry of the tombs was open. Shafts of golden light shone out. All my fears were rapidly being confirmed.

We entered, Vibben sweeping the place from side to side with her handgun. The hall was narrow and high, lit by chemical glow-globes. Intruding frost was beginning to mark the polished basalt walls.

A few metres inside, another custodian lay dead in a stiffening mirror of blood. We stepped over him. To each side, hallways opened up, admitting us to the hibernation stacks. In every direction, rows and rows of ice-berths ranged down the smoothed basalt chambers.

It was like walking into the Imperium’s grandest morgue.

Vibben swept soundlessly to the right and I went left.

I admit I was excited by now, eager to close and conclude a business that had lasted six years. Eyclone had evaded me for six whole years! I studied his methods every day and dreamed of him every night.

Now I could smell him.

I raised my visor.

Water was pattering from the roof. Thaw water. It was growing warmer in here. In their ice-berths, some of the dim figures were stirring.

Too early! Far too early!

Eyclone’s first man came at me from the west as I crossed a trunk-junction corridor. I spun, the power sword in my hand, and cut through his neck before his ice-axe could land.

The second came from the south, the third from the east. And then more. More.

A blur.

As I fought, I heard furious shooting from the vaults away to my right. Vibben was in trouble.

I could hear her over the vox-link in our hoods: ‘Eisenhorn! Eisenhorn!’

I wheeled and cut. My opponents were all dressed in heat-gowns, and

carried ice-tools that made proficient weapons. Their eyes were dark and unforthcoming. Though they were fast, there was something in them that suggested they were doing this mindlessly, by order.

The power sword, an antique and graceful weapon, blessed by the Provost of Inx himself, spun in my hand. With five abrupt moves I made corpses out of them and left their blood vapour drifting in the air.

'Eisenhorn!'

I turned and ran. I splashed heavily down a corridor sluiced with melt water. More shots from ahead. A sucking cry.

I found Vibben face down across a freezer tube, frozen blood gluing her to the sub-zero plastic. Eight of Eyclone's servants lay sprawled around her. Her weapon lay just out of reach of her clawing hand, the spent cell ejected from the grip.

I am forty-two standard years old, in my prime by Imperial standards, young by those of the Inquisition. All my life, I have had a reputation for being cold, unfeeling. Some have called me heartless, ruthless, even cruel. I am not. I am not beyond emotional response or compassion. But I possess – and my masters count this as perhaps my paramount virtue – a singular force of will. Throughout my career it has served me well to draw on this facility and steel myself, unflinching, at all that this wretched galaxy can throw at me. To feel pain or fear or grief is to allow myself a luxury I cannot afford.

Lores Vibben had served with me for five and a half years. In that period she had saved my life twice. She saw herself as my aide and my bodyguard, yet in truth she was more a companion and a fellow warrior. When I recruited her from the clan-slums of Tornish, it was for her combat skills and brutal vigour. But I came to value her just as much for her sharp mind, soft wit and clear head.

I stared down at her body for a moment. I believe I may have uttered her name.

I extinguished my power sword and, sliding it into its scabbard, moved back into the shadows on the far side of the hibernation gallery. I could hear nothing except the increasingly persistent thaw-drip. Freeing my sidearm from its leather rig under my left armpit, I checked its load and opened a vox link. Eyclone was undoubtedly monitoring all traffic in and out of

Processional Two-Twelve, so I used Glossia, an informal verbal cipher known only to myself and my immediate colleagues. Most inquisitors develop their own private languages for confidential communication, some more sophisticated than others. Glossia, the basics of which I had designed ten years before, was reasonably complex and had evolved, organically, with use.

'Thorn wishes aegis, rapturous beasts below.'

'Aegis, arising, the colours of space,' Betancore responded immediately and correctly.

'Rose thorn, abundant, by flame light crescent.'

A pause. 'By flame light crescent? Confirm.'

'Confirm.'

'Razor delphus pathway! Pattern ivory!'

'Pattern denied. Pattern crucible.'

'Aegis, arising.'

The link broke. He was on his way. He had taken the news of Vibben's death as hard as I expected. I trusted that would not affect his performance. Midas Betancore was a hot-blooded, impetuous man, which was partly why I liked him. And used him.

I moved out of the shadows again, my sidearm raised. A Scipio-pattern naval pistol, finished in dull chrome with inlaid ivory grips, it felt reassuringly heavy in my gloved hand. Ten rounds, every one a fat, blunt man-stopper, were spring-loaded into the slide inside the grip. I had four more armed slides just like it in my hip pocket.

I forget where I acquired the Scipio. It had been mine for a few years. One night, three years before, Vibben had prised off the ceramite grip plates with their touch-worn, machined-stamped engravings of the Imperial aquila and the Navy motto, and replaced them with ivory grips she had etched herself. A common practice on Tornish, she informed me, handing the weapon back the next day. The new grips were like crude scrimshaw, showing on each side a poorly executed human skull through which a thorny rose entwined, emerging through an eye socket, shedding cartoon droplets of blood. She'd inlaid carmine gems into the droplets to emphasise their nature. Below the skull, my name was scratched in a clumsy scroll.

I had laughed. There had been times when I'd almost been too embarrassed to draw the gang-marked weapon in a fight.

Now, now she was dead, I realise what an honour had been paid to me through that devoted work.

I made a promise to myself: I would kill Eyclone with this gun.

As a devoted member of his high majesty the God-Emperor's Inquisition, I find my philosophy bends towards that of the Amalathians. To the outside galaxy, members of our orders appear much alike: an inquisitor is an inquisitor, a being of fear and persecution. It surprises many that internally, we are riven with clashing ideologies.

I know it surprised Vibben. I spent one long afternoon trying to explain the differences. I failed.

To express it in simple terms, some inquisitors are puritans and some are radicals. Puritans believe in and enforce the traditional station of the Inquisition, working to purge our galactic community of any criminal or malevolent element: the triumvirate of evil – alien, mutant and daemon. Anything that clashes with the pure rule of mankind, the preachings of the Ministorum and the letter of Imperial Law is subject to a puritan inquisitor's attention. Hard-line, traditional, merciless… that is the puritan way.

Radicals believe that any methods are allowable if they accomplish the Inquisitorial task. Some, as I understand it, actually embrace and use forbidden resources, such as the Warp itself, as weapons against the enemies of mankind.

I have heard the arguments often enough. They appal me. Radical belief is heretical.

I am a puritan by calling and an Amalathian by choice. The ferociously strict ways of the monodominant philosophy oft-times entices me, but there is precious little subtlety in their ways and thus it is not for me.

Amalathians take our name from the conclave at Mount Amalath. Our endeavour is to maintain the status quo of the Imperium, and we work to identify and destroy any persons or agencies that might destabilise the power of the Imperium from without or within. We believe in strength through unity. Change is the greatest enemy. We believe the God-Emperor has a divine plan, and we work to sustain the Imperium in stability until that plan is made known. We deplore factions and in-fighting… Indeed, it is sometimes a painful irony that our beliefs mark us as a faction within the political helix of the Inquisition.

We are the steadfast spine of the Imperium, its antibodies, fighting disease, insanity, injury, invasion.

I can think of no better way to serve, no better way to be an inquisitor.

So you have me then, pictured. Gregor Eisenhorn, inquisitor, puritan, Amalathian, forty-two years old standard, an inquisitor for the past eighteen years. I am tall and broad at the shoulders, strong, resolute. I have already told you of my force of will, and you will have noted my prowess with a blade.

What else is there? Am I clean-shaven? Yes! My eyes are dark, my hair darker and thick. These things matter little.

Come and let me show you how I killed Eyclone.

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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2022.
This eBook edition published in 2022 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Represented by: Games Workshop Limited – Irish branch, Unit 3, Lower Liffey Street, Dublin 1, D01 K199, Ireland.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Anna Pavleeva

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ISBN: 978-1-80026-748-0

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